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13.
DEATH MARCH
RHAPSODY
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD



VISIT...

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DEATH MARCH 13
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD **RHAPSODY**





I'm coming
to see you
right away,
Mr. Satou!

DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody

13

★ ★ ★
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ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 13

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon Cover art by shri

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The Great Desert

Satou here. The word desert makes me think of Arabian Nights. A magic carpet, a genie in a lamp, riding a camel, getting blown off course by a sandstorm and stumbling into a mirage city... It's all very mystical and exciting.

"One, two, three... Only ten giant golems? Don't underestimate me."

Tossing her lavender hair over her shoulder, Arisa held out her emerald-green staff, made with a clearbough from the World Tree.

She pointed it beyond the sand dunes that shimmered in the heat haze, where ten twenty-foot golems were charging toward her, kicking up sand.

"Disintegrate!"

Moments after she spoke, an advanced Space Magic spell burst forth from her staff, forming spatial waves that overtook the golems.

Vwoop! With a strange sucking sound, chunks of the golems' torsos disappeared.

MVA.

MWA.

MOWA.

The golems' final cries echoed forth as they crumbled away.

I'd created them using Stone Object and Create Earth Servant, but even though they were each level 30, they'd been destroyed as easily as papier-mâché.

At this rate, Arisa could probably take on a whole city's army unharmed.

"Heh-heh, piece of cake."

Twirling her green staff, Arisa smirked triumphantly.

She was wearing a cutesy magical-girl-style outfit, but somehow her expression made her look more like an unfortunate minor character.

“Arisa, amaaazing?”

“Piece of meat, sir!”

Tama, with her short white hair and cat ears and tail, and Pochi, with a brown bob cut and dog ears and a tail, went running up to praise Arisa.

We were in the desert to the west of Labyrinth City to test out their new equipment, so the pair was also wearing their new full-body round armor.

I’d gone heavy on the orichalcum in the alloy that made up this new armor; unlike the blue prototype armor, this version was sparkling gold. The interior used the shock-resistant silver hide of the giant monster fish.

It was a little too flashy, so I’d had them wear the prototype round armor with a plain-looking veneer when we went back to Labyrinth City.

Since we weren’t planning on any close combat today, they weren’t wearing their helmets, which would have limited their vision.

“Arisa, watch out.”

“Whuh? ...Yeek!”

Arisa got swept up in the tidal wave of sand created by her own magic.

She must not have put up a Space Magic defense wall.

I used my Magic Hand, a sort of magical telekinesis, to pull Arisa out of the sand.

Tama and Pochi had quickly fled and were hiding behind Nana.

“Blech, my mouff iff all gritty... Thanks, master.”

I put down the sand-covered Arisa and used Everyday Magic to clean her up.

A quick inspection confirmed that her magical-girl-style dress armor was unharmed. I had made the metal parts of this one into an orichalcum alloy, too, so it was sparkly gold like Pochi’s and Tama’s.

“Arisa, are you all right?”

Liza, a scalefolk girl with her crimson hair braided behind her, knelt in front of Arisa to check on her.

Her characteristic tail and the orange scales around her hands and neck were hidden by her armor.

Making metal armor that could hide her tail was actually pretty difficult. To cover the gaps, I'd combined a flexible orichalcum alloy and cloth weaved from the silver hide of a giant monster fish.

"I'm fiiine! I just let my guard down a little too soon."

Arisa smiled back at the worried-looking Liza.

"Master, I have completed assessment of the armor's new Fortress function and the Space Magic Floating Shield movement capabilities, I report."

Nana, a homunculus who looked like a high school-age human, gave her report with her usual blank expression.

The defense wall feature of her new armor had protected her completely from the sand wave, so not a single strand of her long golden hair was out of place.

I'd installed this Fortress function for withstanding attacks from extra-large monsters like areamasters.

It used components from Space Magic spells like Dimension Pile and Deracinator so it could create a thirty-foot-tall, fifty-foot-wide transparent defense wall, capable of stopping large-scale attacks regardless of the user's own physical strength.

However, because it couldn't be moved once it was placed, one had to choose carefully the timing and location in which to use it.

Because of these properties, and the way the lines I used to reinforce it looked like a stone wall, I'd decided to call it Fortress.

It originally used a high-cost magic circuit designed for defending a base, so it had to be charged with a magic furnace or a Holytree Stone engine, like the umbrella equipped on the prototype armor.

"Master, the folding-style umbrella works well, too."

Lulu was in front, holding a parasol-like defense wall.

Her long, straight black hair was resplendent in the desert sun, enhancing her charming beauty.

The fancy maid-style golden armor didn't hurt, either.

"Looks like the expansion speed and the connection with the Holytree Stone circuits are fine, too. What about the folding mechanism?"

"It's perfect."

The transparent defense wall hovering over the parasol folded up and disappeared back into it.

Just as I thought. A parasol complements a maid outfit so well.

Arisa and Mia wanted their own, so I would have to make more later.

"Satou."

Mia came over and clung to my side.

Looking down, I saw her slightly pointed elf ears peeking out from beneath her light-turquoise pigtails.

Her equipment had a gold base like Arisa's, but the fabric parts were blue as opposed to Arisa's red.

"Can I?"

"You want to test out your Spirit Summoning?"

"Mm."

I nodded permission; I'd gotten good at understanding Mia's short sentences.

Mia held up her new staff, built specifically for summoning spirits, and started a Spirit Magic chant.

This elemental staff was made from a bough of the World Tree and Earth Pearls. It consumed one pearl each time it was used, but in exchange, it dramatically saved on magic power usage.

*"...■■■■■ **Create Sand Giant** Suna Shouryou Souzou."*

When Mia's spell was complete, the sand at her feet rose and formed a

gigantic humanoid shape.

The sand giant was level 40, but it was highly resistant to physical attacks, especially cutting and piercing attacks. Like Nana's Fortress, it was perfect for defending against giant monsters.

"Less magic."

Mia was probably saying that the spell used less magic power this time than it had when she used it in Bolenan Forest.

"Maybe it's because you used the sand here?" Arisa suggested. "Or perhaps the elemental staff helped?"

"Mm. Both."

"Huh. Then maybe we should bring a bunch of sand next time we fight a giant monster."

"Please."

Mia nodded.

"All righty. Garage!"

Arisa used the Space Magic spell without a chant, and a white rectangle appeared over the sand.

This spell created a subspace in which the user could store things. In Arisa's case, it could create a space around the size of an old-fashioned Japanese house. Magic was required to open and close the space, but unlike the "Item Box" skill, taking objects out or placing them inside didn't exhaust any magic. It could also store living creatures like golems.

"Mia, order the dirt giant to put sand in the Garage, will you?"

"Mrrr. *Sand giant.*"

Correcting Arisa's mistake, Mia ordered her spirit creation to pour sand into the Garage opening.

I'll pick up some spare sand later, too.

"All right, let's try Lulu's Acceleration Gun next."

I pointed at a golem that I'd sent past the sand dunes as her test-fire target.

"R-right!"

Lulu produced a vivid black rifle from her Fairy Pack.

I used the spike Lulu had received from the black dragon Hei Long to create the barrel of this gun. The handle and other details were even made from Hei Long's scales.

The rifle was around the length of a spear, too long to be held like a normal rifle, so it had to be supported at the hip and secured with magic before firing.

Arisa wanted me to make the barrel break-action-style, as seen in manga such as The Five Star Stories, but I refused, since it would be less powerful that way.

"Let's just use normal bullets for now."

I handed Lulu some steel ammunition.

Lulu produced a cable from her battle-maid outfit and connected it to the back of the Acceleration Gun.

"I'll put magic power into the cylinder now. Charge!"

BEEP.

When Lulu said the trigger word, an electronic noise was emitted from the Acceleration Gun, and the cylinder attached to its back snapped up. Then power ran from the cable connected to the Holytree Stone furnace hidden in the maid outfit's subspace and into the gun, charging it rapidly.

The magic cylinder had a 32 gauge, which could be adjusted to change the strength of the gun.

"It might be better to charge it before battle."

"Y-yes."

The magic cylinder began to emit a blue glow.

"Activating virtual barrel... Spread!"

BEEP-BOOP.

A sixty-foot energy barrel appeared in front of the Acceleration Gun.

Lulu peered through the scope, aiming it at the far-off golem.

“Targeting complete. Activating Dimension Pile to hold barrel in place... Hold.”

An invisible stake suspended the long, heavy barrel of the Acceleration Gun in place.

It would probably be better to stabilize the barrel with Dimension Pile before activating the virtual barrel. I recorded this note in the memo tab of the social-networking column.

“Activating acceleration magic circle... Accelerate.”

PING.

The Acceleration Gun was supplied with three shots’ worth of energy from the magic cylinder’s gauge, and three magic circles appeared around the barrel.

“Firing.”

Lulu pulled the Acceleration Gun’s trigger.

There was a loud boom as the bullet fired from the barrel, leaving a red streak in the air as it hit its target and blew the golem to pieces.

“It’s a lot stronger than the guns you’ve used so far.”

“With three acceleration magic circles, it can reach subsonic speeds.”

I had used the Acceleration Gate spell from one of the scrolls I received through the collection request I placed at the explorers’ guild.

I had added the disposable virtual barrel because of the required distance to accelerate the bullet with Acceleration Gate and the way the sudden acceleration would burn up the barrel.

I was also nearly finished creating a floating fortress with five Magic Cannons. But based on the amount of power and required magic for that project, I’d prioritized this Acceleration Gun first.

“Subsonic, huh? C’mon—make something that could at least beat a rail gun.”

As usual, Arisa casually spouted a ridiculous suggestion.

“A rail gun? How fast are those again?”

“I heard they can reach Mach 20.”

That sounds pretty insane.

“I can’t make it go twenty times faster than this.”

With that, I inspected Lulu’s Acceleration Gun.

Thanks to the virtual barrel, the real barrel was only slightly heated, with no actual damage to the individual components.

“How was the recoil, Lulu?”

“There was none at all, sir. It’s quite different from any live ammo gun I’ve used so far.”

So it had no recoil? Maybe I should try to make it even better than a rail gun, then.

I’d have to test some things out for myself first, though.

“But since you have to shoot it with the barrel so low, it’s a bit difficult to aim. And I think it might be easily affected by the wind.”

“I’ll work on improving the sights next, then. And I might be able to steady the bullets’ trajectory with rifling.”

I’d chosen not to use rifling—spiral grooves carved on the inside of the barrel—this time in order to reach subsonic speeds.

If I wanted to improve the acceleration and the accuracy, maybe I should add rifling to the virtual barrel instead?

That way, there wouldn’t be any wear and tear on the actual barrel.

“More importantly, master, can’t you get rid of all those beeps and boops?”

“Doesn’t that make it easier to tell what’s happening?”

“I dunno... It kinda takes all the coolness out of it.”

Wait, really?

I looked at Lulu for confirmation, and she hesitated, then nodded slightly.

“All right. I’ll see if I can get it to speak, then.”

“Let the great Arisa choose the lines for when it fires and stuff!”

I don't even know if it's going to work yet... She always gets so carried away.

If I could actually find a way to produce voice clips, I might be able to make tools that could chant spells and things like that.

“Master, I wish to test the new Foundation Flexible Sword as well, I request.”

With that, Nana created a transparent sword with her Foundation ability.

It was based on the code from the Practical Magic spell Flexible Shield but altered to produce a sword instead.

It was primarily for parrying and driving away swarms of enemies, so it wouldn't work against stronger foes. At best, the sword was only about as strong as an iron sword forged by me, but since it was based on shield code, it was fairly sturdy.

“I'll produce a golem for you to test it on.”

“Understood, I declare.”

I thought about various issues as I watched Nana fight the golem with her Flexible Sword.

“It's pretty boring.”

“And fighting with a transparent weapon seems to be more trouble than it's worth.”

Arisa and Liza offered their opinions.

“It's only for support anyway, so that seems about right, doesn't it?”

Since it moved semiautomatically, there wasn't much strain on the user, but that meant its movements were also a little easy to read.

But I figured that was a fair trade-off; this balance seemed preferable.

“Our enhancements are coming along nicely.”

“Well, beating a floormaster looks tough, so I want to make sure you're all as well equipped as possible.”

I nodded at the satisfied-looking Arisa, then looked around at the others.

They had all gotten even stronger since they first fought an areamaster just a month ago.

They'd retrained with the elf teachers in Bolenan Forest, learned new moves, and improved on their cooperation. The elves also helped me work on new equipment for them.

After we saved Zarigon and wound up bringing down an areamaster, they'd kept on leveling up. By the time they were level 47, they'd beaten more than twenty of them, which, combined with the ones I'd beaten on my own, meant we'd exterminated most of the areamasters in the Upper Stratum of the labyrinth.

We would probably have to start hunting in the Middle Stratum instead pretty soon.

Our private orphanage and soup kitchen in Labyrinth City were both basically running themselves without any help from me except financial support now, which helped me really focus on training my party and exploring the labyrinth.

We were starting classes for kids who wanted to become explorers, too, but because I had hired people to run those, there wasn't much more to be done on my end.

I still had other land and buildings that I'd bought along with our mansion, so I was thinking about opening an explorers' school, but that wasn't in the works yet.

I would probably have to come up with hunting grounds where the students could get hands-on practice in the field first.



"That's it for testing out new equipment. Arisa and Mia, I'll need you to learn about five new chants each. Is that all right?"

"Okey-dokey."

"Mm. Sure."

The manufacturing devices I used to develop new equipment couldn't produce right-angled magic circuits, so they weren't suited to making magic

tools that required durability, like armor and weapons.

As a result, I used the devices to produce prototypes, but I still needed Arisa's and Mia's magic for the final touches.

"Flying Shoes? Did you make these?"

When Arisa spotted the shoes I'd taken out of my bag, her eyes widened.

"No, these were a salvage find. I thought they'd be handy to wear while testing these Floating Boards. Even if someone falls, they won't get hurt."

Next I produced a surfboard-size magic tool and placed it beside the shoes.

Like the Floating Shield, the board was a magic tool that used the Practical Magic spell Floating Board and could hover in the air if infused with magic.

I ran some magic into the board to make it float, and the girls all stared at it in wonder.

"Whaaa—?"

"Can it fly through the sky, sir?"

"No, it only goes up to waist height or so."

Like the original spell, the height coincided with the amount of magic spent, so that was the maximum limit for this one.

Unlike the Flying Shoes, though, the board didn't require any rare ingredients to make. That meant I could probably mass-produce them like my Magic Swords.

I wasn't sure if they'd catch on, but I thought they could theoretically be useful for carrying luggage or preventing carts from jostling around.

I had a feeling they might already be in use in places I hadn't yet visited, however.

"Fuuun?"

"Want to try it?"

"Aye-aye!"

I lifted Tama onto the Floating Board, and the other kids all gathered around.

“I want to ride, too, sir!”

“Master, I wish to ride as well, I request.”

I agreed to let each of them try riding it with my assistance first before flying solo.

In the meantime, I took out the next magic tool and set it on a dune.

“What’s this one?”

“A prototype I developed before I made Lulu’s Acceleration Gun to test out the magic circuit.”

“I thought it was some kinda weird gate.”

Since the original spell was called Acceleration Gate, I’d made this prototype into a hexagonal frame to test it out.

“Try throwing a rock through it.”

“Whoa, that’s fun!”

As soon as the rock Arisa tossed went through the Acceleration Gate, it zoomed away at a high speed.

“Maybe you could use it as a catapult or something?”

“Like, *Satou, heading out?*”

“Yeah, exactly!”

I imitated a line from a well-known mech anime, and Arisa nodded rapidly, like I’d read her mind.

So I lightly jogged up to the Acceleration Gate and passed through it.

It felt like my body was being pulled, and I zipped forward at what must have been around forty miles an hour.

“Master, Arisa informed me that you are developing a magic tool for rapid acceleration to the battlefield. Please allow me to help you test it as well.”

When I got back, I glared at Arisa for having fun at the ever-serious Liza’s expense.

Arisa was hiding behind Lulu in an apologetic pose; she probably hadn’t

actually expected Liza to take her seriously.

“Mind helping me out, then?”

At that, Liza nodded enthusiastically.

As soon as Liza and I started testing it, Pochi, Tama, and Nana lined up to help. Even the rear guard joined in to measure distances.

“Heading ouuut!”

Holding a Floating Board, Tama zipped through three Acceleration Gates, zooming forward at subsonic speeds.

One gate alone provided plenty of speed, but when we tested how far it could go, we determined that my group could withstand up to three Acceleration Gates with “Body Strengthening” in place thanks to the superhuman physique they had at level 47.

Obviously, because going at supersonic speeds would be dangerous for their bodies, I forbade that.

Of course, even subsonic speeds were still dangerous, so I had them all wear full-body armor and helmets for safety.

WHUMP! While riding the Floating Board, Tama crashed into a sand dune.

“Arisaaa, how faaar?” Tama shouted.

“Let me see... 3,640 feet.”

“Yaaay, a new recooord—?”

“It is! Congratulations.”

Equipped with a megaphone, Arisa was calling out the numbers from a measuring device.

“Amazing, Tama, sir. I won’t lose, either, sir!”

Spinning her arms, Pochi worked up speed and jumped into the Acceleration Gate.

There was a tiny *pop!* and Pochi shot forward.

“...Ah!”

Losing her balance in midair, Pochi went into a tailspin and crashed down into the sand.

Before she did, her round armor's emergency spherical defense wall had activated—she was probably fine.

Sure enough, she came flailing up out of the sand.

“Pbbbt. I failed, sir.”

She shook herself off like a dog, sand spraying in all directions.

“3,116 feet, Pochi. Better luck next time.”

“I’m ashamed, sir.”

“Don’t worry, Pochi...”

“I’ll do better next time, sir!”

Pochi struck a pose and came running back to challenge Tama’s record again.

Liza and Nana tried it next, but both were heavier than Tama and Pochi, so they landed in the range of two thousand feet.

“Waaaah, siiir!”

As soon as she launched herself again, Pochi went into another tailspin.

Her expression was downright gleeful; I figured she must have ruined her balance on purpose this time.

“Masterrr...?”

Already in a runner’s pose, Tama looked at me with sparkling eyes.

She probably wanted to try going into a tailspin like Pochi.

“You can copy Pochi if you want, but you might bite your tongue if you try to talk while you’re spinning. Be careful.”

“Aye-aye, sirrr.”

Tama grinned broadly, giving me a dramatic salute.

I watched as she sprinted up to the Acceleration Gate, then deliberately went into a tailspin in midair.

There was a huge grin on her face as she flew right into a sand dune.

Her angle must've been better than Pochi's, because she actually went through the dune and popped out on the other side, rolling along the ground.

Pochi ran up to her with concern, sand flying everywhere, but then the two looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Nya-ha-ha-ha!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha, sir."

It sounded like they were having a lot of fun.

"I guess I'd better do some work of my own."

I took out two scrolls from Storage: Sand Control and Desert Mirage, both acquired through my collection request at the explorers' guild.

"Let's start with Sand Control, since that seems easier."

When I used the scroll, I was able to freely move about a cup's worth of sand.

Then I tried using it from the magic menu.

This time, the amount of sand affected was considerably larger.

"Whoa!"

"Mrrr?"

When they saw the moving sand, Arisa and Mia let out surprised yelps.

Even Lulu, who'd been keeping an eye on me from the start, let her mouth hang open in surprise.

"Sorry, sorry."

Apologizing to the three, I continued testing out the new spell, making walls and statues out of sand.

The former only went up to about half the size of the barriers I could create with the Earth Magic spell Wall, and the statues required some concentration to hold their form.

Curious about the sand creations, the other kids gathered around curiously.

“Doesn’t seem super useful.”

“Yeah. It can do stuff like this, too, but it’s not very practical.”

I made a sword out of sand, lashed it around like a whip, and turned it into other weapons like an ax and a spear.

“Hey, could you make some kind of high-frequency blade?”

Arisa made an interesting suggestion.

Though I wasn’t able to make the high-frequency blade, I discovered that I could vibrate the sand on the outside of the weapon while moving the rest and create a chain-saw-like effect.

“Now, that’s cool. I guess you could basically call this move Sand Chain Saw?”

“Mm. Water version.”

As Arisa gave the move a name, Mia requested a Water Chain Saw—style spell, so I promised to try making it later.

That seemed to be the gist of the Sand Control spell. I moved on to Desert Mirage next.

“Sky cityyy?”

“It’s floating, sir.”

“Master, there is no girl falling from it, I report.”

Strangely, Nana made a reference to a classic anime film. Arisa must have been filling her head with useless information again.

They started re-creating all kinds of memorable scenes—Mia producing homing pigeons with Spirit Magic, Arisa pretending to play the trumpet, and so on—so I just ignored them and returned to testing out the new spell.

“So it just makes the scale bigger, I guess?”

When I used Desert Mirage from the magic menu, the city looked a bit bigger and more realistic, but that seemed to be all.

Huh? That used a surprising amount of magic.

“Hey, master...” Arisa tugged on my sleeve. “...Did that mirage just become

real?”

“Wow. You’re right.”

A mirage with a real physical form seems like a self-contradiction, if you ask me.

“I’ll go check it out.”

I used “Skylrunning” to fly up to the floating city.

A normal mirage would get farther away the more you approached, but I was able to enter this one just fine.

“How is it?”

Ever the worrywart, Arisa contacted me with the Space Magic spell Telephone.

“The buildings are very Arabian Nights, but I can touch them, and there seems to be real water flowing in the canals.”

My map read **this area does not exist on the map**, like when I had been in a shadow jail created by Shadow Magic.

I used “Skylrunning” to search the mirage from above and confirmed that there was no one to be found in the city.

I checked a few houses and the palace in the center, but there didn’t seem to be furniture or anything of the sort, either.

Checking my log, I found that I’d acquired several new titles.

> **Title Acquired: Tower Master**

> **Title Acquired: Mirage City Master**

> **Title Acquired: Illusion Lord**

> **Title Acquired: Otherworld Master**

> **Title Acquired: Otherworld Lord**

As usual, there were some weird titles mixed in there.

“But since it’s a scroll, it should be an intermediate spell, right? Maybe it’s some kind of Space Magic, not Light Magic?”

Arisa made a good point.

I selected Desert Mirage from the magic menu and viewed its detailed information on the AR.

“Advanced...”

“What?”

“It’s an advanced composite magic spell, apparently.”

In fact, it was a composite of three kinds of magic: Light, Shadow, and Space.

No wonder it required so much MP.

“Advanced? But I thought scrolls could contain only intermediate spells and below.”

Indeed, Viscount Siemmen’s scroll workshop that I frequented couldn’t make advanced magic scrolls at all, never mind a composite of three kinds of magic.

“Maybe it’s because it’s from a labyrinth.”

The Sandstorm Labyrinth, where this scroll was found, no longer existed, but there might still be other surviving scrolls. In addition to the explorers’ guild, I decided to put in requests with the merchants’ guild to try to collect more scrolls from other lands.

“.....Huh?”

For just a second, deep inside the mirage city, I thought I caught a glimpse of a child-size figure.

I saw a flash of something purple near their head, so I thought maybe Arisa had come up using Space Magic, but her position hadn’t changed on my radar.

There was nothing else shown on my radar or map, either—maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me.

“What’s the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

It was extraordinarily hot and bright in the desert, so that sort of thing probably happened all the time.

“All right...”

After that, I tried making some golems and such, and I found that the mirage I created could still be maintained.

However, doing so cost about one hundred MP per minute, probably making it impossible for anyone but me, since my magic recovered at an insane 180 MP per minute.

The exits could be opened only by the mirage’s creator, even on the inside, so it could probably be used for some hellish purposes.

However, Arisa’s Space Magic would allow escape from inside the mirage, which meant it wouldn’t be possible to trap demons or teleporting monsters inside.

Technically, it could probably be used as a high-capacity storage area, but I already had my limitless Storage system.

At best, maybe it would be useful as temporary accommodation for refugees or for imprisoning captured bandits?



“Butterflyyy?”

After testing the new spells and equipment, as we took a break in the shade of a small airship I produced from Storage, Tama found a bright-red butterfly.

“In the desert?”

“You can see through it to the other side.”

Arisa and Liza tilted their heads at it.

“Can’t touch iiit?”

“Ah! It ran away, sir.”

Tama tried to catch the butterfly, but her hand went right through it. According to my AR, it was a harmless apparition called a “ghost papillon.”

As we looked on, it split into two butterflies, then three.

Tama and Pochi each chased a different ghost papillon.

The fleeing butterflies must have triggered her animal instincts; Pochi crouched on all fours, her tail swishing as she locked on to her target.

“Hiya, sir!”

Pochi sprang at the ghost papillon, then suddenly disappeared from sight.

“Pochi?!”

She must have gotten caught in quicksand.

I used “Warp” to teleport over to the spot where she’d disappeared, then dove into the sand after her. My radar showed her location, but I couldn’t catch her with my Magic Hand.

“Magic Power Armor.”

I surrounded myself with magic, preventing sand from getting into my eyes and nose as I pushed through the quicksand to chase after Pochi.

Soon I came clear of the sandy darkness into an open space.

Activating the Practical Magic spell Mana Light from the magic menu, I lit up my surroundings.

Sand was still falling from the ceiling and flowing at the bottom of the cave like water, where I found Pochi lying unconscious.

“Pochi!”

Lifting her up, I checked to make sure she wasn’t hurt.

“Meeew...?”

Behind me, Tama hit the floor with a *thud*.

She must have dived into the sand after me.

I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to contact Arisa.

“Thank goodness. Liza was about to dive in after you, regardless of how I tried to dissuade her. You three are all right, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Wait there—we’ll be back soon.”

“Okey-dokey.”

Judging by my map, it looked like Nana was holding Liza back from jumping in after Tama.

“Pochiii?”

“Mmmrgh... Tama?”

Pochi’s eyes fluttered open.

“Ah! Master, sir!”

Pochi jumped to her feet.

“Does anything hurt? Can you breathe?”

“Pochi’s fine, sir.”

At that, I put a hand to my chest and sighed in relief.

“All right, let’s—”

As I started to speak, I noticed that Tama was staring into the cavern, her ears standing at attention.

“What’s the matter?”

“Is there something there, sir?”

“Something’s weeeird—?”

Tama’s instincts were almost always right in these situations.

I looked in the same direction, and the words **Barrier: City Core/isolation mode** appeared in my AR display.

There must be an invisible barrier there. Checking my map, I saw there was a blank space on the other side.

“Want to check it out?”

“Aye-aye!”

“Yes, sir!”

I took the two of them with me toward the barrier.

When I reached out to it, I felt something like a faint wall of air.

As with other barriers I’d found before, I was able to pass through it easily.

I used “Search Entire Map” from the magic menu to get information about this blank part.

There was a hidden door deep inside the vast room, with a spiral staircase on the other side leading to one lower room.

That must be where the City Core was kept.

“Ouchie.”

“Gweh, sir.”

I heard two cute little complaints from behind me.

Tama and Pochi had run into the barrier on the other side.

A similar thing had happened when we visited the giants’ village at the Mountain-Tree barrier.

“Are you all right?”

“Don’t worry, be happyyy!”

“This is nothing, sir.”

As the pair rubbed their noses, I was able to pull them inside by their free hands.

I opened the hidden door and headed down the spiral staircase with Tama and Pochi in tow.

Just to be safe, I had Arisa and the others take the airship up into the sky to wait.

“Sparkly!”

“Very pretty, sir.”

At the bottom of the staircase was a dome-shaped room about 150 feet in diameter; a glowing, multifaceted, crystalline white object was floating above a slightly raised area in the center.

It looked just like the City Core I’d seen beneath Muno Castle.

Sure enough, my AR display read **City Core: Faetarias**.

There was a low staircase leading up to the core, surrounded by glowing

stone canals, but the water seemed to be frozen.

The City Core was flickering faintly, its light terribly weak.

I walked up to the top of the stairs leading to the core, but it gave no reaction.

In Muno Castle, the City Core had spoken to me... Oh, but when I'd looked at the barrier, I had seen the words **Barrier: City Core/isolation mode**.

"Wait right there for a minute."

"Aye-aye!"

"Yes, sir."

Motioning for Tama and Pochi to stay back, I walked even closer to the City Core.

It still didn't react, so I steeled myself and tried to touch it. Just in case, I set my name field to **blank**.

.....●●

As soon as I touched the core, a voice that wasn't quite male or female echoed from it.

> Skill Acquired: "Flue Empire Language"

I see—so that must have been the Flue Empire language just now.

I put skill points into the new "Flue Empire Language" skill and activated it.

There was no further reaction for a while, but then the City Core glowed a little bit brighter, and the voice spoke again.

"<Welcome, O King who rules over a superior territory. Do you wish to register this land as a satellite city?>"

I'd heard this line before. It must be a preset line for City Cores.

"<No, not really.>"

When I responded honestly, the City Core's light weakened as if it were disappointed.

"<O King, please take control of this land.>"

“<Why?>”

“<A lord’s permission is required to lift isolation mode.>”

“<...Aren’t you no longer isolated already?>”

“<Isolation mode refers to being cut off from contact with the underground vein network.>”

I get it. So it’s basically like a stand-alone mode.

“<Is there a problem with staying in isolation mode?>”

“<If the mana source is cut off while we are not connected with the underground vein network, we will run out of the magic that was accumulated during rotation period seventy-two. Without a source of magic power, the City Core unit will disintegrate again.>”

The City Core dimmed weakly.

Arisa once mentioned that no one had heard of any new City Cores being made since the age of the Flue Empire. It would be a shame to lose a precious City Core to lack of magic power.

“<All right. I’ll register this place as a satellite city, then.>”

“<Understood.>”

Light gathered around my head, and a blue-crystal crown manifested there.

Through the City Core, I felt this land’s mana source reconnecting with the underground veins.

Since it had been left alone for so long, there was a considerable amount of resistance when the source reconnected.

Overall, it felt very strange.

“Happyyy?”

“It got brighter, sir.”

Tama and Pochi seemed excited about the City Core’s transformation.

Even though they couldn’t understand what the fading core was saying, the kindly duo seemed to have been worried about it.

“<Register other assistant administrators?>”

The glowing blue City Core now flickered brightly as it spoke.

“<What’s an assistant administrator?>”

The City Core explained that it referred to any nobles with peerage.

“<Do assistant administrators get any special privileges?>”

“<An assistant administrator is granted a terminal and can use it for communication as well as utilizing the City Core’s powers relative to their authority.>”

Communication between terminals?

“<How far apart can they communicate?>”

“<Within the city and its immediate surroundings. If the sender is close to the City Core, they can transmit anywhere within the territory.>”

That wasn’t very far.

Not to mention, it cost way more MP than spells like Telephone.

I was guessing it used the Practical Magic spell Signal.

I could easily imagine my kids playing walkie-talkie, but if it was just for fun, it’d probably make more sense for me to use my prototype production equipment to make a magic tool for communication.

Out of curiosity, I asked if I could make Tama and Pochi assistant administrators, but it responded that slaves did not qualify.

“<Would you like to annul the slave contract?>”

“<Can you do that?>”

“<Yes. Would you like to proceed?>”

“<No, not right now.>”

If I ended their contracts without talking to them first, I could imagine the beastfolk girls begging me not to abandon them, so I decided to leave it at that for now.

I also asked if the City Core was capable of removing a Geis, but

unfortunately, it responded that this was impossible.

“<Reconnection with separate storage space complete. Displaying a list of contents.>”

A semitransparent board displayed in front of the City Core, and a golden door appeared behind it.

“Mew!”

“A door, sir!”

“It’s apparently a storage space.”

At a glance, I saw some interesting items on the list, so I decided to check it out with the beastfolk pair.

“This picture’s pretty...”

“That wooden horse is cool, sir.”

When Tama stopped to stand in front of the painting, Pochi and I explored the rest of the treasure.

There was a huge quantity of gems, gold coins, and the like, and even a small amount of bluecoins.

We also found artwork, sculptures, and rare magic tools like transparency cloaks and a wooden Pegasus, as well as magic devices that needed bluecoins to power them.

Unfortunately, there weren’t any weapons or armor.

The bookshelves were full of books, but most of them were administrative documents from before this area became a desert, so I didn’t find as many spell books and magic-tool design specs as I had hoped.

“<Is it all right if we take this treasure with us?>”

“<Of course. It is yours by rights as the current lord of this territory.>”

Since the City Core gave us permission, I put all of it in Storage.

The one exception was the painting Tama had taken a liking to, which I let her put in her Fairy Pack.

“<O King, requesting permission to ascertain present conditions.>”

City Cores from the Flue Empire era didn’t emit passive signals, so it was asking if it could actively emit one.

Of course, that would also mean revealing its existence to potential enemies.

“<Are the other City Cores in isolation mode as well?>”

“<That is very likely.>”

In that case, even if we risked sending out an active signal, it probably wouldn’t reach the intended recipients.

“<Do you know where the other cores are? If you give me their locations, I can go check on them myself.>”

“<O King, we are in your debt.>”

Judging by the map the core presented, there was a total of 243 other locations.

Even if I used “Warp,” it would probably take a while to check on them all.

They’d been dormant for hundreds of years. Why not let it wait until at least after lunch?



“City Cores, huh? We gonna make a new kingdom here?”

When I told her about the City Cores and the Flue Empire treasures we’d found underground, that was Arisa’s response.

“No, that’d be way too much work.”

“Awww, c’moon.”

It might be fun to make an oasis as a stopping point for desert travelers, but managing a whole city? No, thank you.

“Besides, they’ll probably be busy restoring their magic for now.”

I’d provided the core with 90 percent of my MP, plus one forged Holy Sword battery’s worth of excess magic.

Because the amount of magic required for the City Core was significantly

larger than even my own MP, it was still far from fully charged. However, the core had said that this would at least be enough to defend itself from any natural disasters and such for a while, so it could recover the rest normally from the underground veins and mana sources.

“Master, appropriately shady area located, I report.”

“Thank you, Nana. Lulu, could you take the airship down?”

“Right away, master!”

The airship landed in the shade of a few rocks around three hundred feet high.

Since it was a bit too hot and sandy for eating lunch outside, I used Stone Object to make a Shinto shrine-style *torii* gate and building. I considered making it a Parthenon-style temple instead, but I was in more of a Shinto mood today.

Though I was a little cautious, I didn’t get any mysterious flashbacks like when we saw the broken-stone *torii*- style Travel Gate back in Seiryuu County.

“A stone *torii* is one thing, but having the shrine itself be stone, too, is a little strange.”

“True.”

I had to agree with Arisa.

Next, I used spells like Air Curtain and Air-Conditioning to adjust the temperature around us.

“Cooooo!”

“It feels very, very good, sir.”

Even Tama and Pochi, who’d been playing around in the sand, must have been worn down by the desert heat.

“Is this the shrine office? There’s a veranda inside.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think it’d be right to make a bathroom inside a temple, so I decided to use it for that instead.”

I had still made only the exterior, not any furnishings for inside.

“Y’know, my cousin lived at a shrine. I used to play there a lot until sometime in grade school. Being in one now feels kind of homey.”

Huh, I didn’t know that.

“We used to eat both fresh and roasted corn plus sweet potatoes on the veranda all the time.”

Leave it to Arisa to have more gastronomical associations with a temple than spiritual.

“I’ll set up a bath inside so you can all clean yourselves off.”

Brushing the sand out of Arisa’s hair, I used Stone Object to make a bathtub and a drainage channel in the office area. This spell was almost too convenient.

The tub was really more like a pool, so I set up some partition screens around it.

“Master, you should bathe with us.”

“Mm. Together.”

“Sorry, I have other things to do first.”

Arisa and Mia tried to drag me to the bath, but a robe would make it tough to get rid of all the sand, and I didn’t feel comfortable getting naked in the tub with the older girls.

“Awww, but this was my chance to see your—”

“Arisa,” Mia warned.

“—Ahem. I mean, my chance to serve you, master.”

I sent the grumbling Arisa off to wash up behind the partitions, then used Everyday Magic to clean myself off before skimming some of the documents I’d acquired underground.

“How great is the power of the gods...”

This grand introduction marked a passage of the lord’s journal describing how the great desert came to be.

“...But we mere mortals could never fully control the dragonflame orb, which

contains the power of the dragon god."

Huh. This "dragonflame orb" wasn't mentioned in the list of materials I'd learned about in Bolenan.

The closest thing I had was a true-dragon pearl. Taking it literally, maybe this dragonflame orb was an item containing the flame breath of the dragon god?

"Everything turned to ash. The demon lord's forces, our armies and cities, and the very earth of the empire burned away, and even our underground vein was destroyed. I doubt the day will ever come when man can live on this land again."

The journal ended there.

There were no bones or anything in the City Core room, so the lord must have abandoned the core and left.

Huh?

But when I restored the core from isolation mode, it was able to connect to the underground vein just fine...

Well, whatever.

More importantly, I wanted to look into this dangerous-sounding dragonflame orb.

Just in case, I searched my Storage and the map, but I didn't find any such item.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"What's up, master?"

Arisa wandered over, fruit-flavored milk in hand.

"I was reading about how this desert came to be."

"Whaaat? I thought you might've found some secret Flue Empire art or spell books..."

"There were a few spell books, too. Want to read them later?"

"Of course I do!"

"Me too."

Arisa and Mia looked excited.

Drying Mia's still-wet hair with a towel, I asked if they had any requests for lunch.

"I want *somen* noodles! And then for dessert, I'll have an entire half of a watermelon!"

Arisa's request sounded like a child's summer vacation ideal.

"Meeeat?"

"I want meat, too, sir."

"Dry your hair off first, you two."

Tama and Pochi came running over sopping wet, so Liza chased them down and dried them.

Okay, but maybe you could put clothes on first, too, Liza.

"*Somen* and meat, huh? Then how about *char siu* pork, omelets, and some diced cucumbers and tomatoes?"

"Now it sounds like your average chilled-noodle dish."

Chilled noodles might be nice, too.

I'll make some tomorrow.

"Oh, I know! Let's have *nagashi somen*!"

"Sure, why not? I have enough bamboo."

"Bamboo?"

Mia tilted her head, so I gathered the kids around and explained the Japanese tradition of *nagashi somen*, a noodle dish served flowing down a bamboo flume.

Then I produced some bamboo from Storage, halved them vertically and trimmed the knots, then linked them together with Treespirit Pearls.

"Water Spirit."

Mia used the Spirit Magic spell Create Water Spirit to summon a water pseudo-spirit called an "undyne." It used its water manipulation abilities to

control the flowing water for the *nagashi somen*.

“Ooh, the water’s looping around.”

When the water reached the bottom, it moved through the air and back to the top of the flume.

This way, any noodles that weren’t picked up on the way down would be carried back to the top, too.

“Very impressive.”

“Mm.”

Mia blushed and nodded at my praise.

Lulu and Liza helped me boil the noodles and prepare the toppings.

Mia had a few extra requests, and I made some sweet-and-salty boiled monster mushrooms as a result. They would’ve made a good topping for sushi rice.

For some reason, we wound up with more varieties of *char siu* than actual noodles, but nobody here would have a problem with that.

“All right, here goes.”

Once preparations were complete, I had the group line up along the bamboo flume and started pouring noodles down from the top one helping after another. If I didn’t pour enough, the girls near the end of the flume would never get any.

“Fancy.”

“This is very elegant, I declare.”

Mia and Nana seemed to be enjoying scooping up the noodles.

“Too haaard!”

“Mr. Noodle keeps slipping away, sir.”

Tama and Pochi weren’t as good with chopsticks as the others, so they were having a tough time.

“It’s delicious. The texture of the *char siu* changes if mixed with the

cucumbers or omelet slices.”

“I wanna tryyy!”

“Me too, sir.”

After a few rounds of noodles, Liza quickly turned her attention to the pork, and Tama and Pochi followed suit, piling their plates high with meat instead of noodles.

“Ooh, I found some pink noodles!”

At Arisa’s words, Tama’s ears perked up.

“Yellow noodles.”

When Mia chimed in, Pochi turned around, too.

The beastfolk pair ran over to look at the colored noodles, which Arisa was happy to show off.

“Colorfuuuul?”

“Do they taste different, too, sir?”

“They taste the same, but it’s said that eating colored noodles will bless you with good health.”

Arisa made up a fictional legend to pique Tama’s and Pochi’s interest further.

“I wanna get blessed, too, sir.”

“I’ll catch the next ooone?”

I had mixed in some colored noodles just for fun, but it seemed they were popular with kids even in a parallel world.

Tama and Pochi stood with their chopsticks at the ready, so I sent some colored noodles flowing their way.

To make it easier to catch, I used Magic Hand to slow the noodles down as they passed the pair.

“I’m so fast, it’s like they’re frozen in place, sir!”

That’s because they are.

“Got ’eeem?”

“Hiyaaaa, sir!”

The two swooped down like birds of prey to scoop up the no-longer-flowing noodles.

They’d given up on chopsticks and were using their hands.

“Slipperyyy?”

“This is fun, sir. I want to eat more, sir.”

Well, I’m glad they like it, at least.

“You mustn’t grab them with your bare hands. Here, use these.”



“Aye-aye.”

“Sorry, sir.”

Liza scolded the pair, then took their chopsticks away and gave them tongs instead.

I decided to join in on the fun, too. Most of the food we ate in the labyrinth was filling and nutrient-rich, so it was nice to have a light, refreshing lunch for a change. The cool noodles felt great as they slid down my throat.

When I realized the kids were getting bored of the regular noodle soup base, I offered them some sesame sauce, then enjoyed my own noodles with various condiments.

“Watermelon’s the best dessert on a hot day.”

Once we’d finished our *nagashi somen* lunch, we sat down on the veranda and feasted on watermelons.

I’d given out big watermelon halves to whoever wanted them, to be enjoyed with spoons.

Needless to say, this was Arisa’s request.

“The *char siu* was tasty, but watermelon is yummy, too, sir.”

“*Oui, oui...*”

Pochi and Tama had loaded their plates with so much pork that you couldn’t see the noodles underneath, but clearly their appetites were still totally intact, as they were now practically shoving their faces into the watermelons.

“Careful, you two. If you eat watermelon seeds, they’ll grow inside your belly.”

“Mew!”

“Oh no, sir!”

Tama and Pochi looked horrified by Arisa’s joke.

“So instead of eating the seeds, you spit ’em out like this! *Pbbt!*”

One must spit the seeds out like so if he wishes to properly enjoy the summer

of his youth!

Upon hearing Arisa's words, I remembered something another person had once said to me.

Sitting on the veranda, Arisa looked back at me, and her smile called to mind that of a green-haired young girl.

"C'mon, master, don't pick the seeds out with a toothpick! Live a little!"

Ichirou! Thou mustn't eat like such a lady!

Arisa's violet hair fluttered in the warm desert breeze.

At the same time, overlapping with what was in front of me, I saw a girl's *silver hair* rustling gently in the summer breeze.

The flashbacks kept coming, one after another.

What's going on?

"...Master?"

A willowy hand brought me back to reality.

I shook my head lightly, trying to dispel the strange sensation.

Looking at Nana, I remembered that this was the same daydream I'd experienced when we were playing by a stream in Bolenan Forest.

"Oh, it's nothing. The desert sun must've worn me out a bit, that's all."

"Please take care of yourself, master," Liza said gently.

Just then, Lulu came back from the kitchen prep area.

"Master, I made fruit punch."

"Mm, yummy."

"The fruits floating in the sweet syrup are very cute, I report."

Mia and Nana were pleased with the delicate dessert Lulu had made.

There were pineapple and kiwi pieces floating in it, too, so vivid that just looking at it made me feel refreshed.

The sweetness of the syrup was delicate enough to draw out the natural

sweetness of the fruits without being too overpowering.

“It’s delicious, Lulu.”

When I complimented her work, Lulu gave me a glowing smile.

Lately, her smiles were even more radiant than usual; maybe her inferiority complex was finally starting to fade.

She’d also prepared a big bowl of some of the fruits Rei and Yuuneia had given us when we last visited Paradise Island on our way back from Bolenan Forest.

“Bananas are yumyyy.”

“I like apples and pineapples, too, sir.”

“The kiwi is delicious with yogurt, I report.”

All the fruits were fresh and delicious.

We relaxed for a while and enjoyed the tropical fruit.



“I’ll be back in a bit.”

While the kids were taking a post-lunch nap, I decided to go around the desert to check on the other City Cores.

“Be careful, okay? Don’t do anything crazy.”

I waved at Arisa to reassure her motherly concerns, then headed up into the sky with “Skylarking.” Once I was up high enough, I used “Flashrunning” to proceed toward my first destination.

“...This area sure is huge.”

No wonder they called it the “great desert.”

It was divided into several different areas on the map, bigger than any other location I’d traversed so far.

If I didn’t have a skill that let me travel faster than a jet plane, I would probably go crazy trying to get around.

“Was this all made by that dragonflame orb thing?”

There were several tall mountain ranges at the border of the desert.

I was curious whether the explosion had created the mountains and why the transformation into sand had stopped at that border.

“Sand, sand, sand...”

It was strange that the desert consisted of so little other than sand.

There were some monsters, but in such few numbers that you would never run into them unless you were very unlucky indeed.

“...Oh, an oasis!”

In the far western corner of the great desert was a small oasis.

Instead of being part of the great desert, this area was called the Vustelue Emirate, home to a tribe called “the people of the sand.”

According to the information from “Search Entire Map,” the land was almost four times the size of the Ougoch Duchy, but the population and number of cities were only around that of a single county in the Shiga Kingdom.

I was tempted to take a detour and check out this new land, but I held off, since I was in the middle of searching for the City Cores buried in the sand.

Once my group defeated a floormaster, finished this leg of training, and went back to visit Seiryuu City, we could go on a tour of the other lands.

I went around to each of the 243 points and found only two living City Cores. The rest contained only crystals that seemed to be the remains of a core.

Many of them were still intact, so I put them in Storage to see if I could repair them.

Like the first City Core I’d found, I registered the domains of the two other living cores as part of my territory and left them each a Holy Sword’s worth of magic power.

I also set seal slates at each of the City Core points, which I thought might be helpful for crossing the desert and sightseeing in other lands.

Omen

Satou here. I'm not sure I love the phrase "the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach," but I do think using some kind of profit as a "carrot" to dangle in front of someone is a tried-and-true technique. It's a lot easier to work hard when you can see the goal just ahead of you.

"This is a bigger turnout than I expected."

A few days after I forged a contract with the City Core in the great desert, I went to see how things were going at the guild training grounds, where we were offering classes for aspiring explorers.

"Yes, indeed."

The person who led me there was a female guild clerk who was taking care of arranging for lecturers, recruiting students, and other such things for the class.

Thanks to her, all I had to do was provide operating expenses and help work out the initial lesson plans.

"It helps that many kids are hoping to get rich quick by collecting crafting recipes these days, but I think a lot of them are after the food that's served following the lesson, too."

There were some adults among the students, but the vast majority were middle-school-aged kids.

Many of them really did appear to be excited about the food: As the aroma of soup began to waft in from the guild's galley, they immediately started to get restless.

"Looks like we'd better wrap it up."

As soon as the instructors declared the class over, the children all stampeded toward the back wall, forming three perfect lines.

“Are those the lines for receiving food?”

“Yes, that’s right. The children seem to be very good at forming orderly lines these days—perhaps thanks to your soup kitchens, Sir Knight.”

I guess my group’s hard work corralling the kids when we first started the soup kitchen had paid off.

“There’s meat today!”

“Gosh, what a feast.”

“I’m gonna get the question right and earn an extra helping for sure this time.”

“Me too! I’ve taken this lesson twice now.”

The kids chattered excitedly as they watched the guild chefs bring out pots of soup and grilled meat.

As for the “extra helping” they were talking about...

“What’s the one thing you should do when you use a flash bomb?”

“Tell your comrades that you’re gonna use it first!”

“That’s correct. I see you were paying attention. Here, have an extra piece of meat.”

“Yaaay!”

...If the kids could answer a question about the day’s lesson correctly, they got a little more food.

Many of the kids tended to doze off during class, so Arisa had proposed this as a countermeasure.

“The instructors love it, too, since it means the kids listen carefully during class.”

“Are most of the instructors on the older side?”

“Yes, we try to employ retired explorers who are good with children.”

“Then is the amount of money we budgeted for personnel enough?”

I’d been planning on employing younger explorers with at least two or three

years of experience, so the amount of money I gave the guild for hiring wasn't very high.

"Oh, it's more than enough. We have so many applicants, it's been difficult to narrow down."

The guild clerk looked over at the instructors, who were all smiles as they ate, surrounded by their students.

Maybe they were happy to have their wisdom passed down to younger generations.

Satisfied with what I'd observed of the class, I returned to the main guild hall along with the clerk.

"Is it just me, or is it livelier than usual around here?"

The guild hall was always crowded, but today many of the explorers seemed to be in high spirits, especially the younger ones.

"It's thanks to the veria potions."

Veria potions were magic healing potions made from a succulent plant that grew in huge numbers around Labyrinth City.

It was originally popularized by the elf sage Trazayuya, but the recipe had been lost over the years, and it was on its way to becoming the stuff of legend and a common form of fraud.

"You mean those recipe fragments that were found in the labyrinth?"

"Yes, the explorers' guild and the alchemists' guild are both offering rewards for the fragments, so there are many explorers hoping to strike it rich, including some of the aspiring students from our classes."

Part of the reason the guild was so lively was that people were exchanging information on areas they'd already explored and stuff.

Incidentally, I was the one who had distributed those recipe fragments in the labyrinth.

There was an obvious need for cheaper potions to be widely available in Labyrinth City. Thanks to that, I'd developed a recipe usable by humans based

on the original recipe made for elf seal slates, divided it up, and hid the pieces in treasure chests inside the labyrinth.

I could've simply brought it to the explorers' or alchemists' guilds as myself or Kuro, but I thought it would be better if the explorers were able to bring the recipe to Labyrinth City with their own hands.

Treasure hunts are always fun, after all, and it gives people something to be hopeful about.

"Along with the recipes, real veria potions have also been found in treasure chests, so many young explorers are selling them to buy new equipment."

Thanks to that, business in the shopping districts was improving as well.

Looking around the guild, I could see that there were a lot more youngsters with newer-looking equipment than before.

...Purple?

A flash of violet went past my eyes.

For a second, I thought it must be Arisa, but the face peeking out from the hood appeared to be that of a dogfolk child.

The figure had already disappeared into the crowd, so I tried searching my map for reincarnations or demons, but nothing came up. I guess having purple hair or fur didn't always mean someone was a reincarnation.

Curious, I tried using Clairvoyance to search the guild and the surrounding area, but I couldn't find the child again.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, I just thought I saw a dogfolk child with purple fur, which struck me as unusual..."

"The cursed color? Yes, that is quite rare."

Judging by her tone, the clerk had never seen this person before, either.

I asked that she inquire after the child's name if she happened to see them around. If I knew their name, I could search my map more easily, and then I could figure out if this was someone we needed to worry about.

I parted with the clerk on the first floor and went to the guildmaster's office.

"Hey there, Satou. I heard you beat an areamaster?"

"Nothing gets past you."

My group had already defeated more than twenty areamasters, but I reported only one of them to the guild.

If I sold the areamaster cores to the guild, I could get a pretty hefty reward, but instead we held on to them and declared that we'd defeat a floormaster next.

"I should hope not! I *am* the guildmaster, y'know."

That's not very convincing when you're here lazing around on the sofa while your lackeys do the work.

Evidently, the guildmaster's usual babysitter—her secretary, Ushana—was away on business.

"Still, we haven't seen such a small party beat an areamaster since Miss Ringrande's heyday."

Looking wistful, the guildmaster relayed some stories of the old days.

Miss Ringrande was known as the Witch of Heavenly Destruction. Before she joined up with Hayato the Hero, she'd apparently brought down an areamaster within her own party and even defeated a floormaster with the help of a band of Holy Knights from the royal capital.

Come to think of it, I thought I remembered hearing a similar story back in Muno Castle from some Ougoch Duchy Temple Knights.

"But surely, you aren't planning to try to take down a floormaster with a single party, are you? I can talk to Zarigon or some other famous garnet parties for you if you want."

"I appreciate your concern, but we won't be challenging a floormaster for a while yet, and I already have a party in mind to ask for help. There's no need to worry."

It was nice of the guildmaster to look out for me, but it would be problematic

to expose my group's super-advanced equipment in front of others. I'd created their armor to keep them safe, so if letting people see it put them in danger, it'd defeat the purpose entirely.

"I see..."

The guildmaster frowned, looking deep in thought.

She wasn't the type of person to get all bent out of shape over someone refusing an offer of kindness, so it was probably unrelated.

"Satou, I don't want to steal the credit for any of your achievements. Keep that in mind and hear me out..."

I nodded.

"The guild would be willing to take on the classes you've been sponsoring."

She must mean the class for aspiring explorers I'd just been visiting. I nodded for her to go on.

"I can use my discretionary power to get funding for the rest of the year, and after that, we'll have the kingdom pay for it."

"That sounds wonderful."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. It was a bit meddlesome on my part to start them in the first place."

If the classes could run without my help, I could think of nothing better.

No doubt it was beneficial for the kingdom to train personnel who could eventually provide valuable cores.

According to the guildmaster, they had attempted to run these classes once before, but since they had resulted in only a slight increase in explorers progressing from wooden badges to bronze badges, the classes were discontinued to cut costs.

"We'll get the details squared away when Ushana comes back," the guildmaster said, and that was the end of that topic.

From there, she shifted the conversation to a progress report on Jelil's

ongoing attempts to defeat a floormaster.

It had been over a month since we saw his party set out into the labyrinth, and yet they still hadn't started their battle against the floormaster, according to reports.

"They've been attempting to clean up the Room of Trials, and it seems their garrisons are attacked by wraiths and wights every night."

The lack of sleep was affecting morale, leading to mistakes in battle and other issues that were heavily impeding their progress.

"Fortunately, they requested aid from a wraith-extermination specialist in the royal capital, and I'm told they've finally finished cleanup there."

"I'm glad to hear it."

I was wondering if I should go help get rid of the wraiths, but it sounded like that was no longer necessary.

"You look genuinely relieved about that... How very like you, Satou." The guildmaster shook her head, but she was smiling. "Most people would be happy to hear that their rivals have been slowed down, no?"

"I'm not particularly trying to compete with them."

We were aiming to defeat a floormaster only because it was a good goal for my group's training.

"I can't tell if you're unselfish or just unambitious... And yet, you're the most talented young explorer we've got. Go figure."

That sounded like an insult, but the guildmaster didn't seem to mean it in a bad way, so I simply smiled and nodded.

"Oh, right. We've had some kids around, like the princess from that little country and the viceroy's third son, to ask when we're planning to start classes for nobles or a young explorers' school."

From the sound of things, Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom and the viceroy's third son, Gerits, had paid visits to the west guild.

They must have heard rumors about the explorers' school while we were in

the labyrinth.

“I’ve been considering making a school to raise kids into explorers, but that’s still in the idea phase—I haven’t made any concrete plans just yet.”

“It’d basically be like the classes on a bigger scale, right? You should go for it. I’ll grant you permission from the guild, and I’m sure you can get permission from the viceroy in no time flat, knowing you. I’ll even look for teachers for you, hmm?”

That was a pretty kind offer.

“Why would you do all that?”

“Cause I’ve got high hopes for you, kid.”

The guildmaster gave my frank question an equally frank response.

“Do you realize how much you’ve done for Labyrinth City in the short time you’ve been here?”

“I mean, I just opened a soup kitchen and founded a private orphanage, didn’t I?”

“Don’t make it sound so simple. There’ve been plenty of people before you who’ve had similar ideas and couldn’t make ’em happen. And I know how hard it was to get permission from the viceroy to start the soup kitchen, too...”

She went on to talk about the canal cleaning, the plunderer incidents, and so on.

“It was you and the Hero’s follower Sir Kuro who dealt with the plunderers, not me, remember?”

“Only after you initially caught Ludaman.”

Oh, right. I forgot I’d caught the Plunderer King Ludaman as Satou.

Things can get confusing when you’re disguising yourself as various personas and acting in secrecy.

“Anyway, just think about it.”

“I will.”

An explorers' school... The classes for explorer hopefuls were pretty broad; it would probably be good to have a place where people could get a more well-rounded education, delving into things like martial-arts basics and field training.

If we did open a school, it'd be best to start small—have a few scholarship students attend for free while we determined what direction the school should take.

I decided I would get opinions from Arisa and Liza when I got back home.

"This is terrible, Guildmaster!"

As I was chatting with the guildmaster, her secretary, Miss Ushana, burst into the room.

She was usually very composed, so whatever was going on, it was probably a big deal.

"Calm down and tell me what's wrong."

"A demon lord!"

Demon lord?

Ignoring the guildmaster and Ushana, I searched the map.

Nope, no demon lords here. My "Sense Danger" skill wasn't reacting, either, so it mustn't be an emergency just yet.

"That doesn't tell me anything. What, did a demon lord appear somewhere?"

"No, it's a prophecy."

The guildmaster had jumped to her feet, but now she settled back onto the sofa.

"Just a prophecy? Didn't we already get one of those a while back?"

Indeed, Labyrinth City Celivera had been mentioned among the prophesized demon-lord revivals I'd heard about at the Tenion Temple in the old capital.

"This is a new prophecy."

"Who's on duty this month?"

"The Karion Temple."

“Ah, the place with the newbie priestess?”

Each month, one of the priestesses of the six temples (excluding Zaicuon Temple) was to use the “Oracle” skill to receive a prophecy from their respective deities.

“So what did it say?”

“A mighty king shall appear who reigns over the sea of sand.”

...Oh.

That’s probably about me, huh?

The timing was a little too spot-on, and the revived City Cores kept calling me “King,” too.

“A king...? The ‘sea of sand’ must be the great desert to the west, right? Nobody would be crazy enough to try to settle such a barren land, and I doubt any kingdom would try to attack us from there. Which means...”

“Yes, the head priestess of the Karion Temple suspects that it means a demon lord will be revived in Celivera Labyrinth, since it extends beneath the great desert.”

“That does make sense...”

“Are you scared, Lilian?”

Without so much as a knock, the elf Sebelkeya, a counselor of the guildmaster’s, entered the room.

Despite her graceful, young features, her words were as harsh as ever.

“I keep telling you not to call me that.”

“All right, Zona the Crimson Devil. What’s the guild going to do?”

“We’ll have to smoke out the demons. They always start scheming behind the scenes before a demon lord is revived. Labyrinth City was even attacked by demons not long ago. To think they would flaunt their presence so boldly and still try to continue their plot... They’ll regret underestimating me.”

They were still assuming a demon lord was going to be revived.

It was true that the green greater demon had been trying to revive a demon lord in Labyrinth City, but I had already put a stop to that plan.

More likely than not, this prophecy was about me awakening the City Cores that had slept beneath the great desert.

But I couldn't very well just tell them that. What now?

"There are four demon lords who have appeared in Labyrinth City before..."

"...Doghead, the Scorpion Lord, the Bug Lord, and the Tempestuous Lord."

The guildmaster began talking, and Ushana continued the tale.

"The oldest of all demon lords, also known as the Devil, is the Dogheaded Demon Lord. According to ancient records, even the Hero and the seven gods could not defeat him. He was driven away only by the Dragon God and the sky dragons."

So even all the other gods except the Dragon God couldn't beat him?

For some reason, something about that stuck out to me as odd, but I couldn't determine what.

"Then there is the Scorpion Lord, who tormented the Orc Empire with endless armies; the Bug Lord, who wiped out several small nations with plague and famine and even halved the population of the Saga Empire; the Tempestuous Lord, who controlled tornadoes and destroyed many Shiga Kingdom cities. All horrible villains who caused great pain and difficulty for the Heroes of their times."

As Ushana finished describing the demon lords, her face was pale and shaken.

"Hmm? Hasn't Celivera Labyrinth had the Bone Lord, the Abyss Blood Lord, and the Steel Lord, too?" Sebelkeya asked.

"Those are fictional demon lords. They're not recorded anywhere in history."

I was curious about those works of fiction, but it would probably be in poor taste to ask about them right now.

"Well, if I see any demons, I'll be sure to let you know right away."

"Please do. And if any demon lords pop up, go ahead and defeat them for

me.”

“Yes, of course.”

I returned the guildmaster’s joke with one of my own.

Sebelkeya looked satisfied, but I was pretty sure this was a misunderstanding stemming from my contract with the City Cores, so she probably wouldn’t get the adventure she was hoping for.

Because the Oracle date was publicly announced, and there were government officials and labyrinth army officers in attendance, I decided there was no need to run and inform anyone.

For now, I would only warn my comrades not to be alarmed.



“Whaaat? So the demon-lord-revival rumors aren’t real?”

“Too baaad?”

“Sir.”

“Mrrr.”

When I returned to the mansion and told the others about the Oracle prophecy and my conjecture, the younger girls seemed disappointed.

Did they actually want to fight a demon lord?

I had no intention of ever letting my group do that, since demon lords were far too dangerous.

“Master, you received a delivery from Viscount Siemmen while you were out.”

“Thank you, Miteruna.”

I accepted the package from Miss Miteruna and looked inside to find scrolls.

When I’d developed Nana’s new Flexible Sword technique, I sort of wanted to try it for myself, so I asked Viscount Siemmen’s scroll workshop to create one for me. It was ready sooner than I expected.

Foundation and Practical Magic were closely compatible; it didn’t take much

tweaking.

The package also contained the lesser Wind Magic spell Speaker. I'd created it to replay sounds recorded with the Sound Recorder spell.

"Hmm? There are five in here."

Aside from the ones I'd ordered, I also found the intermediate Water Magic spell Tidal Wave, the intermediate Ice Magic spell Ice Field, and the intermediate Lightning Magic spell Call Thunder.

According to the enclosed letter, they'd discovered some rare scrolls while taking inventory, so they sent them along as a present, a thank-you gesture for the original Light Magic spell Pixie Light I'd developed for them, which was selling like hotcakes among royal-capital nobles.

"How was the class you visited, master?"

After waiting for me to look over the scrolls, Liza approached me about the class.

"Oh, it's going great. The guildmaster even said they'd take it over for me and get funding from the government."

"Awww, but then they'll keep all the profits, too!"

"What's wrong with that? They'll be taking on all the difficult work, too."

Arisa looked dissatisfied.

"Well, at least make sure they keep using the course's name."

"Name?"

"Sure, I registered it in the guild records as Pendragon Explorer Candidate Course."

But that made it sound like we were recruiting the students to join our house or our party...

"Is that really the name...?"

"Pretty great, right?"

Arisa grinned proudly. I reached over and mussed her hair.

“Heeey, you’re messing up my hair!”

Despite her complaints, Arisa looked a little bit pleased.

“Me too!”

“Pet Pochi, too, sir!”

“Mm. Next.”

I patted each of the younger kids on the head in turn as I relayed what the guildmaster had suggested about the explorer school.

“Sure, why not? If they’re that eager to help, you should go for it. Besides, I thought you were having Kajirocchi train the Lovely Wings so they could teach at the explorers’ school.”

I’d hired the Lovely Wings duo to teach the classes, but since the guildmaster had gone so far as to supply teachers, now they had nothing to do.

I didn’t want them to be stuck sitting around, bored, so I had Mr. Kajiro start teaching them basic martial arts and anti-monster techniques while he was rehabilitating his newly healed leg.

“We’ve got plenty of room in our budget, and if the guildmaster’s offering to help with the hiring, you oughtta take her up on it.”

That was true. As far as my personal finances were considered, I was still in the black, but with all the materials and cores we’d been selling while the rest of the group leveled up, our party had raised a considerable amount of money, too.

“Fair enough. We shouldn’t just keep all the wealth to ourselves, so maybe we’ll use some to start training future explorers.”

“That’s the spirit!”

With no objections from the others, we decided to work on opening the explorers’ school in our spare time.

There was no rush, so I figured I could start after making arrangements in various places.

Royal Capital

Satou here. Any bureaucratic work always requires a lot of red tape. On the other hand, they say you can get through all of that easily if you have the support of an influential person, but that might just be an urban legend invented by the jealous masses.

“So that’s the royal capital...”

I set a teleportation seal slate in the mountains with a distant view of the royal capital and gazed at the city as it was bathed in morning light.

Setting up a school for explorers wasn’t the kind of thing that could be done in a day, so I’d decided to first go help Eluterina and the other girls who were currently dispatched to the royal capital.

I’d sent them there to research popular goods and a possible base for trading in the royal capital, since the girls living in the tenement houses in the downtown area of Labyrinth City needed to make more money.

Eluterina was also there to check up on her grandfather, Marquis Kelten, who’d been accused of treason. If it was a false charge as she so confidently claimed, I figured I could help with that, too.

“I guess I’ll bring Tifaleeza, too, before we meet up.”

I donned the white wig, military uniform, and foreign face that disguised me as Kuro; used the Return spell to head back to Labyrinth City; and went to the Ivy Manor to pick up Tifaleeza.

“M-my head is spinning... Lord Kuro, is that city what I think it is?”

Tifaleeza’s short silver hair swayed above her shoulders, a look of surprise replacing the usual clever expression on her lovely face.

“It’s the royal capital of the Shiga Kingdom.”

“Th-the royal capital? But that’s quite far away from Labyrinth City, isn’t it...?”

“You could say that.”

It's definitely not as far as Tokyo is from Osaka.

“I—I see...”

My point-blank answer seemed to have convinced Tifaleeza.

“Wear this.”

I handed her one of the transparency cloaks I'd found in the storage space of the City Core room, and she put it on without hesitation.

It certainly made her transparent, but I could still see her outline, just like I'd been able to see through the Illusion spell before.

Clearly, magic and items like this didn't entirely work on me.

“Can you see me?”

“L-Lord Kuro, you're see-through... Ah, my body is gone, too!”

“Calm down.”

I should've explained the transparency cloak first.

After taking a moment to appreciate the rare look of confusion on the normally coolheaded beauty Tifaleeza's face, I picked her up and used “Skyrunning” to head toward the royal capital.

The capital had gates facing each of the four cardinal directions. I chose the one that was closest to Labyrinth City and also the largest: the west gate.

It was wide enough for a six-lane highway, and there was a long line of people waiting to be admitted.

We landed in a discreet place, took off the transparency cloaks, and followed some people getting off a stagecoach to the end of the line.

“So we'll be entering normally through the gate?”

“Of course.”

I nodded at Tifaleeza.

In truth, I'd been planning to keep the cloaks on and cross over the wall, but my AR pointed out a dome-shaped invisible barrier around the city labeled

Barrier: Royal Capital <Alarm>, so I decided to call that off.

Just to be safe, I'd made fake identification papers in advance for getting into the city. They didn't inspect anyone too closely except merchants and armed men, so it should be easy enough.

"Wait, you there with the white hair."

We were almost through as easily as I'd expected, but then a scowling knight called out to stop me.

"May I help you, Sir Knight?"

"I'll be asking the questions here. Take off the mask and explain your business in the royal capital."

I'd forgotten that I was still wearing a mask that covered the top half of my face.

"I'm delivering this to a client, that's all."

Removing the mask, I took the cloth-wrapped sword that I'd instructed Tifaleeza to carry and held it out to the knight.

"Wh-what's this?!"

As soon as he unwrapped the ancient-looking sword slightly, the knight gasped.

It was the light-attribute Magic Sword I'd found in the treasure chest of the crazy dendrobium areamaster.

"You're delivering a sword this fine on foot?"

"At the client's request. If you want to know more, you can ask Count Ritton's wife directly."

Since the knight seemed suspicious, I tried dropping the name of a royal-capital noble.

She was evidently a friend of the Labyrinth City viceroy's wife, but we'd never actually met, and of course she hadn't hired me to deliver a Magic Sword. It was just a white lie.

"Count Ritton's wife... I see. You may pass."

The knight handed back the Magic Sword, and we headed inside.

My “Fabrication” skill obviously worked as well as ever.

> Title Acquired: Courier

> Title Acquired: Delivery Dealer

> Title Acquired: Smuggler



“Lord Kuro! And Tifaleeza, too!”

“It’s been a while, Lady Eluterina.”

With the help of my map information, we made our way to the inn where Eluterina and the other girls were staying. It seemed like a normal-enough place.

Eluterina’s smile seemed weak. It might have been my imagination, but she was probably upset about the situation with her grandfather, Viscount Kelten.

“Everyone doing well?”

“““Yes, Lord Kuro!”””

The other young noblewomen and the three merchant girls I’d sent along with them greeted me warmly.

They all had a healthy glow about them. Life in the bustling royal capital seemed to be treating them well.

“Lord Kuro, here are our selections for trading commodities, and we’ve chosen three potential sites for our trading headquarters.”

“Excellent work.”

They showed me some sample goods, all of which seemed like they’d be popular with the gaudy explorers in Labyrinth City.

They’d even made contact with a few companies interested in requesting transport.

“Now all we need to move forward is...erm...the trade license.”

Eluterina hesitated, probably because she didn’t want to seem demanding,

since I was the one who needed to get the license.

“Sorry, but I don’t have it quite yet. I’ll ask my master to hurry. Just wait a little longer.”

I’ll have to dress up as Nanashi the Hero tonight and go bother the king for a license.

Eventually, I hoped to have the girls sell things like my hand-forged Magic Swords and skypower engines for airships to nobles and the royal family.

For now, their trading preparation seemed to be going well.

“And did you find out what’s going on with Viscount Kelten?”

Once I’d dismissed the other girls, I spoke to Eluterina.

“Well, you see...by the time I went to visit my grandfather, he had already...”

From her heavy tone, I was afraid he’d committed suicide or something, but she explained that he’d resigned from his post as military cabinet minister and was confined to his home.

“Is it a false charge like you thought?”

“Yes.”

Eluterina nodded.

But, she went on, there was no one else who could prove it.

“Is there anyone who’d stand to benefit from his losing his position?”

“Plenty of military nobles, defense contractors, and so on, yes...”

The ever-patriotic Viscount Kelten had apparently rejected any nobles or traders who tried to curry favor with bribes.

“The person who benefits most is Count Boppan, who was the military vice minister and my grandfather’s aide, but...well, the man is simple and honest almost to a fault, so it’s hard to imagine him plotting anything like this...”

I see. So the second-in-command is a bit of a meathead.

“Then perhaps it’s someone who wants to use him as a puppet?”

“As far as the military-related nobles, the only ones I can think of who might

try such a thing are Viscount Nagua or Baron Mos.”

Eluterina must be quite knowledgeable about the nobles of the royal capital if she could come up with suspects right away.

It reminded me of Tolma, Viscount Siemmen’s younger brother, who knew everything about the nobles of the old capital and their relationships.

“Viscount Nagua and Baron Mos, eh?”

I searched the map and found that both of them were at the home of Viscount Nagua.

In the same room were three other nobles and a man who seemed to be a merchant.

This piqued my curiosity, so I used the Space Magic spells Clairvoyance and Clairaudience to see what was happening in the room.

“It won’t be easy to defeat Kelten.”

Oh. What a well-timed conversation.

I activated Picture Recorder and Sound Recorder. These spells recorded anything I saw or heard, including information gained through spells like Clairvoyance and Clairaudience.

“To think that not only His Majesty but even the prime minister, who so frequently clashes with him, would stop him from resigning...”

“Whatever is the problem? All we need to do is forge some proof that the Norn Company was committing fraud and drag them down from the position of the government’s munitions purveyor, without Kelten’s allies noticing...”

“What, and get your Godozo Company in their place?”

“Of course. I will be sure to make it more than worth the effort for all of you.”

It all made sense—a munitions dealer was using these ambitious nobles to fan the flames.

> Title Acquired: Peeping Tom

> Title Acquired: Knower of the Truth

“Remember, this is all as His Highness commands. Do not forget where your loyalty lies.”

“We understand, of course.”

Geh, so there was royalty involved in this, too?

“Looks like your guess was right.”

“What?”

I summarized my findings for the confused Eluterina.

“Lord Kuro, could you perhaps share this information with my grandfather?”

“...No.”

I was silent for a moment, then rejected Eluterina’s request.

It would be all well and good to tell Viscount Kelten what was happening, but I shouldn’t barge into the home of someone who was currently under house arrest. Besides, if there was royalty involved in all this, things were going to get complicated.

“Wait a few days to tell Viscount Kelten. I’ll talk to my master and have him tell the crown what I just saw and heard.”

It sounded like the king and the prime minister wanted Viscount Kelten to stay on as the military minister, so if I showed them what I’d recorded, they could probably take care of the issue, including the royal family member who had instigated the situation.

...Honestly.

I looked at the dots on my radar and heaved a sigh.

“And those of you who are listening in, not a word of this to anyone. Understood?”

““““Yes, Lord Kuro,”””” came several voices at once.

I opened the door, and the girls who’d been listening from the other side tumbled into the room.

No doubt they were worried about Eluterina, not listening out of any ill-

advised curiosity.

I was planning on visiting the king that night, so in the meantime, Eluterina showed me around the potential storefronts.

“Have you decided what our company name will be?”

“A name, eh...?”

As we were walking, Eluterina brought up an important question.

I thought about going with something like “Horn River” or “Pen Press,” but I decided I should go with a distinctly Japanese name.

Looking over the list of fake names I’d had Tifaleeza give me with “Name Order,” I picked an appropriate one.

“How about Echigoya Company?”

This was a classic name for merchants in historical dramas, so any Japanese person should recognize it.

Besides, it seemed like the kind of name that would let me get away with dealing with all sorts of people. Although I intended to run an honest business, of course.

“That’s the name of a merchant you work with, isn’t it? Will we be using their trading license, then?”

I furrowed my brow at this question.

Then I remembered. Right after I rescued them, I’d told them I would send a merchant by that name, then completely forgot about his made-up existence.

“Oh, sorry. Echigoya is actually one of a few aliases I have.”

“Ah, I see.”

Eluterina accepted my excuse immediately.

I was curious what sort of person she thought Kuro really was.

At any rate, something else had grabbed my curiosity as I looked around the street, so I decided to ask her about that instead.

“I see a lot of people wearing foreign garb.”

“Yes, there are many more weaselfolk, people from the western continent, and other foreign merchants than when I last lived here.”

There were a lot more foreigners hanging about the downtown and slum areas recently, from what she told me.

Suddenly, I heard a murmur in the crowd, and the passersby all stared at something across the street.

Following their gazes, I saw three men and women on horseback in the glittering armor of Holy Knights.

The two men were equipped with swords and shields, but the woman had a white rifle strapped to her back with a very fantasy-like design. It didn't appear to use a scope.

“That's unusual. A gun user?”

“You don't know of her, Lord Kuro? That is Lady Helmina, the fifth of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga.”

The woman had a short blond bob, and her almond-shaped eyes looked kind despite her stern expression.

She was only twenty-seven years old but already near level 50.

I wondered why her rank was lower than Prince Sharorik, a member of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga and the third prince, even though her level was higher.

Maybe because of the name, using anything other than a sword affected your rank?

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on the armored trio's conversation.

“Did you hear about the dragon that appeared in the mountains of Zetts County, ma'am?”

“I certainly did. It seems Sir Torel has been sent to deal with it.”

“Of course. They can't use an airship against a dragon, so it makes sense to send Sir Torel, the Flying Dragon Knight.”

So there were other living dragons besides the black dragon Hei Long.

“I envy him, frankly. I would’ve liked to fight a dragon, too.”

“You’re amazing, Lady Helmina!”

At the Shiga Swordsman’s bold claim, one of the other Holy Knights looked at her with admiration.

I guess Holy Knights are battle junkies, too.

They didn’t all seem to be so battle-hungry, though. The other Holy Knight smiled wanly and changed the subject.

“Lady Helmina, I’m told you’re being dispatched to Labyrinth City?”

“Oh, yes. The Karion Temple there received a prophecy about some sort of ‘king of the desert’ being revived, so they’re sending me there to investigate.”

“A king of the desert... Is it a demon lord?”

“That’s what I’m going to be investigating. Ugh... Surely Heim or Ryuona would’ve been better-suited to a desert than I would...” She heaved a sigh, then grumbled about someone who was presumably her boss. “Sir Juleburg is so cruel.”

Sorry. This is probably all because I made a contract with that City Core.

By the time the Holy Knights were out of earshot even with my “Keen Hearing” skill, we had finally reached our destination.

“Lord Kuro, it’s that building with the red roof.”

Eluterina pointed at the first candidate for our storefront.

It was bigger than I expected. The plot of land it occupied was smaller than that of our mansion in Labyrinth City, but it was a four-floor building and probably had several times more floor space.

It was partway between the downtown district and the neighborhood where more affluent commoners lived—the perfect spot for a store.

We could make the first floor the storefront, the second floor for offices and storage, and living quarters on the third and fourth floors.

“There are stables and carriage-parking space in back. There’s not a lot of space for storage, though, so once the company gets larger, we may need to

rent a cheap warehouse in the industrial area.”

“Good thinking.”

I nodded, and Eluterina showed me the other two candidates.

In the end, we decided to reserve the first one, since it was the ideal location and size. It was more expensive than Labyrinth City but nothing I hadn’t expected.

I gave Eluterina the money to draw up a contract for the store and buy initial stock.

Next, it was time to visit the real king at his castle.



“Good evening, Your Majesty.”

Disguised for the first time in a while as the purple-haired Nanashi the Hero, I went to visit the private room of the king of the Shiga Kingdom.

I’d left a letter in his office that afternoon to give advance notice of my visit.

And yet, for some reason, there was no one else in the room but the king.

I thought he’d send in the body double I met in the old capital and watch from a separate area, or maybe have his guards on standby around the room, but I guess I was wrong.

Sure, the prime minister and the leader of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga were in the room next door, but this still seemed a little too lax.

“It’s been a while, Nanashi the Hero.”

When I appeared at his window, he invited me inside without reproach.

Even his voice was the same as the body double I’d met. He must have been thoroughly informed of my meeting with his body double in the old capital.

“Yes, well, I had some business high in the sky and across the southern seas.”

“So you have been invited even to the heavens? You are indeed a true hero of the Shiga Kingdom.”

No, not the heavens, in space—Oh, never mind. That would be a tough one to

explain anyway.

He had casually acknowledged me as a hero of the Shiga Kingdom, but I ignored that.

“Sir Nanashi, your tone is somewhat different than it was before, is it not?”

Oops.

Come to think of it, when I spoke to the duke and the king’s body double in the old capital, I’d used only short sentences like Mia.

Since then, I’d changed Nanashi’s tone to that of an impolite child under Arisa’s guidance to avoid being associated with Satou, but of course that was different from what the king must have heard from his double.

“Oh yeah. I was tired from fighting the demon lord and monster fish back then, so I didn’t feel like talking much.”

With the help of my trusty “Fabrication” skill, I gave a vague excuse.

“I see... Pardon me, but would you mind showing me the true power of the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis once more?”

Oh? Is he doubting me?

“Yeah, no problem.”

I produced the Holy Sword in question from my Item Box, gave it the appropriate amount of magic power, and invoked the scripture.

“<Dance.>”

The sword split into thirteen blades and hovered around my body.

“Oooohhh...”

The king looked like his eyes were about to pop out of his head.

I hoped he wouldn’t touch the activated blades, since it’d be bad news if I let a king get hurt.

After he’d watched for a few moments, I spoke up.

“Will that do?”

“Yes, thank you.”

But the king still looked like he wanted to say something.

“What is it?”

“Sir Nanashi, would you mind showing me the face under your mask just once?”

Taking me up on my inquiry, the king made a cautious request.

“Sure. But only for a second. I’m shy, you know.”

Because I had figured he might ask this, I was already wearing a disguise mask underneath.

I’d even upgraded the technology in the mask specifically for this visit: I’d used the techniques I learned in Bolenan Forest to add recognition-inhibiting magic circuits to it.

I carved similar circuits into my outer mask, too, so I could block most clairvoyance-and X-ray-vision-type skills.

“How’s this?”

Not wanting to put on airs, I took off the mask to show him my false face.

Like the first disguise mask I’d made for Nanashi, this one was designed after my childhood friend as she would have looked around high school age.

“Oh, good gods!”

Huh? The king looked so shocked, I thought he might faint. Was my friend’s face that unappealing to him?

Even so, praying to the gods seemed a bit excessive.

“Lord Ya... I mean, Lord Nanashi, could I perchance ask you to show your esteemed face to the prime minister as well?”

...Lord?

Why was he talking to me like he was addressing a superior all of a sudden?

“No need to call me ‘Lord,’ Your Majesty. I don’t like to show my face to people, but I guess if it’s just the prime minster, that’s fine.”

The prime minister didn’t have “Analyze” or any perception-type skills, after

all.

“Your generosity is deeply appreciated. Please allow me to go and summon him.”

The king called the prime minister in from the next room.

According to my Tolma Memos, the information on nobles that I’d gotten in the old capital, the prime minister was from one of the three great noble families in the Shiga Kingdom, the former Duke Dux.

He had passed leadership of his family down to his son and now served as the king’s right-hand man in administration.

Still, though...

Nothing about the man gave off any of the pomp you’d expect from that noble lineage.

He looked like the sort of person who’d make you call him *General*, a large-framed man with huge muscles. The Zhuge Liang-style fan clutched in one meaty hand didn’t suit him at all.

His only combat-related skill was “Self-Defense,” so I had no idea how he’d gotten so macho.

“You called, Your Majesty?”

The prime minister appeared to have been informed about Nanashi already, since he didn’t look particularly surprised when he glanced at my mask.

The king briefly introduced us before moving on to business.

“Lord Nanashi, if you would be so kind.”

The prime minister raised his eyebrows at the polite way the king was addressing me.

“Mm’kaaay.”

I shrugged and pulled my mask aside to show them my face.

“Oorghhhhh!”

After a moment of shocked silence, the prime minister uttered an even more

alarmed noise than the king had, and tears started pouring down his cheeks.

Why in the world were they both overreacting like this?

My childhood friend had a kind of plain face, but she wasn't particularly bad-looking or anything as far as I was concerned, so I didn't think there was anything about her face that should be so shocking to these people.

If anything, maybe she looked strange by the beauty standards in this world, like Lulu.

"Satisfied?"

I held the mask up questioningly.

"Your generosity is greatly appreciated."

"No need to be so formal," I reminded the king, who was starting to get tearful as well.

"Perhaps you do not remember, but the house of Dux has served Lord Yamato since before the kingdom was founded."

Hmm?

Was I supposed to know that?

I tilted my head in confusion as I put the mask back on.

"The image of Lord Yamato that was recorded with the Treasure of Facsimile at the time of the kingdom's founding is still kept in the portrait room of the house of Dux."

I was even more confused by the king's sudden statement.

Sure, the mention of a camera-like magic tool caught my interest, but I wasn't sure where this photo of the ancestral king Yamato came into play here. Was he just bragging?

"L-Lord Yamatooooo!"

After wiping away the tears with one massive arm, the prime minister suddenly came over as if to embrace me, so I nimbly slipped out of his reach.

"Calm down, Dux."

Fortunately, the king stopped him when he tried a second time.

Did he call me “Lord Yamato”?

Maybe my childhood friend’s face bore a resemblance to the ancestral king Yamato?

If so, that was a hell of a coincidence.

“My name’s Nanashi. I’ve got nothing to do with the ancestral king.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Judging by the looks on your faces, you definitely don’t.

It looked to me like they were convinced that Nanashi was a reincarnation of the ancestral king Yamato.

But why would...? Ohhhh, the hair.

As the Undead King Zen and Hayato the Hero had both mentioned, reincarnations were often born with purple hair.

So it wouldn’t be too strange if the king assumed I was a reincarnation because of my wig color.

But surely, a reincarnation wouldn’t have the same face, and jumping to conclusions based solely on my appearance didn’t seem befitting of a king and a prime minister...

Well, whatever. It’d be a pain in the neck to try to prove it when they were so thoroughly convinced, so I decided to let them think whatever they wanted.

Although I did ask them not to treat me like the ancestral king Yamato.

“So do you mind if we get down to business now?”

“My sincere apologies, O great anc—erm, Lord Nanashi.”

The king started to call me “ancestral king” but corrected himself.

Should I start with the business about Marquis Kelten or the trade license? Probably the former.

“Firstly, a retainer of mine asked that I clear the name of a relative who’s been falsely accused.”

“Falsely accused? You mean...”

The king stopped himself, but it sounded like he knew what I was talking about.

“Yeah, Marquis Kelten’s being framed for treason.”

“So it is indeed a false accusation.”

The prime minister nodded.

Should you really trust me so easily just because I look like the ancestral king?

“Here’s the proof...”

I used the Illusion and Speaker spells, linked to the sounds and images I’d captured with Sound Recorder and Picture Recorder via Data Output, to play the recordings back for them.

Since the data transfer rate was too slow for video, I used still images instead.

“Is this the legendary ancient treasure, the Time-Stopping Crystal?”

“No, it’s just a spell.”

There must be some kind of video-related magic tool, too.

“Dux, I trust you can take care of them.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. They will be dealt with strictly, in accordance with the law.”

I got the feeling this would mean some kind of violence, but it wasn’t my place to take issue with this place’s legal system, so I decided I’d leave it to them.

Although I still didn’t know which royal had incited these nobles, I figured the government could investigate the rest.

There was no point in me meddling any further.

“Thank you very much, Lord Nanashi. Now I need not lose a treasured vassal.”

“Will you require that magic for the trial?”

“No, not so long as the prime minister and I saw it for ourselves. I do not wish to trouble you any further, Lord Nanashi.”

So they didn't need to show any proof to the suspects or other nobles?

I was glad I didn't have to do any extra work, but still.

"I am sure Kelten would be weak in the knees should he hear that it was the anc—er, Lord Nanashi who cleared his name."

"Yes, he is a fervent believer in the ancestral king."

"But that's not me, remember? The ancestral king is sleeping in the Dreamcrystal Mausoleum."

"Ah, but of course."

"I had nearly forgotten."

The pair of them nodded exaggeratedly.

Clearly, whatever they might say, they still firmly believed that I was the ancestral king.

I decided there was no point in continuing to correct them, since it was obviously a lost cause.

"As for my other order of business, I want to start selling magic goods in the Shiga Kingdom, but I need a trade license and stuff. Could you hook me up?"

"I shall take care of it right away."

The king agreed immediately.

He wrote a few lines on an official form and stamped it with the royal seal.

At least it was easy to get stuff like this done in a monarchy.

"The official paperwork for the trade license will take a few more days, but this paper will allow you to conduct business without a problem in the meantime."

With that, he handed me the signed paper.

"Thanks."

For some reason, the two of them smiled widely when I thanked them.

I wasn't sure what about saying "thanks" struck a chord with them, but probably no point in worrying about it.

“Lord Nanashi, what sort of products are you hoping to sell?”

“Oh, mostly magic tools and armor and some medicinal goods. I’ve got a few airships for our featured product, too.”

“Airships, you say?!”

I gave a broad answer to the prime minister’s inquiry, but the king exclaimed in surprise at the word *airships*.

“Um, yes. I thought I’d sell large airships for transport and small ones for personal use. Although aside from one sample transport airship, all I’ve got are some skypower engines, so it’ll be a while before we can fill orders for them.”

I’d made the transport airships about on par with the ones that traveled between Labyrinth City and the royal capital. Their cruising speed and max velocity were about the same, although mine were about 40 percent larger. I figured it’d be good to have a high loading capacity.

As for the personal-use airships, I mostly wanted to popularize them among nobles so it wouldn’t be unusual for me to be seen traveling around cities freely as Satou.

“Personal?! But airships are far too valuable to be used for individual merrymaking!”

That seems like an exaggeration.

“It’d be convenient if the lords of other regions could travel to and from the royal capital easily, wouldn’t it?”

“Certainly, but do you really have skypower engines in such great supply?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

I didn’t want to use up my giant monster fish fins, but I had gathered a considerable amount of supplies for making skypower engines during our travels on the sugar route.

I had plenty more fins from bullet tuna and narwhals than the sharklike monster fish. I was practically swimming in materials, no pun intended.

The only drawback was that skypower engines made from the thin fins of the

bullet tuna and narwhals didn't have quite as much output as the ones made with the thick monster fish fins.

Most likely, it'd be impossible to make skypower engines out of the former without my high "Magic-Tool Crafting" skill level.

Besides, only the monster fish attacked coastal towns, so the tuna and narwhals probably weren't widely known as reliable skypower engine material suppliers.

"May I ask how many you are able to produce, approximately?" the prime minister asked, sounding a little frantic.

"I'd say about five of the big ones and twenty of the small ones."

Incidentally, it'd take about thirty of the small airships to match the power of one of the large ones.

More importantly, I was worried about whether or not they'd give me permission. The king and the prime minister both looked deep in thought.

I wouldn't want to be selling contraband.

"Lord Nanashi, I am terribly sorry to say this, but it may not be in the best interest of our kingdom's national defense for you to go about selling that many airships so easily..."

"I was only planning to sell them to Shiga Kingdom nobles for now. Pretty please?"

Putting on this cutesy voice was starting to pain me a little...

"Hmm. W-well, I suppose..."

"I'd prefer that you give priority to the royal family."

The king sounded like he was about to grant me permission, but the prime minister interrupted with a condition.

He'd been acting like an ancestral-king fanboy mere moments ago, but now he wore the face of a real politician.

"If you're going to be selling airships, please negotiate with the royal family or the royal army first."

“Okey-dokey.”

“‘Okey-dokey’? I’m ashamed to confess I do not recognize this phrase. Is that a refusal?”

“Oh, sorry. It means I agree.”

With that, I’d acquired permission to sell airships within the kingdom.

I agreed to present them with one of the five large airships as a gift and would receive my trade license and a medallion in return.

This was the official story, anyway, since it was the Echigoya Company that would be selling the airships, not Nanashi the Hero.

The medallion they planned to award me was the badge of a royal-family-approved merchant, so it could be used in dealings with nobles.

This was a proposal from the prime minister, who was worried that I shouldn’t go flaunting paperwork signed by the king himself too readily.

Incidentally, they said that they couldn’t determine the value of the large airship without seeing it for themselves. They would go the following day to see the sample that was docked in the royal-capital airport.

“Oh, that’s right.”

At this rate, Satou still wouldn’t be able to use an airship.

“Wh-what might be the problem?”

“Oh, um, it’s just... I already sold a few small airships in the southern islands.”

I took as light a tone as possible with the nervous prime minister.

“A-as long as it’s only a few...”

The prime minister and the king looked dismayed for a moment, but they didn’t reprimand me or anything.

This way, if I was seen flying an airship as Satou, I could always claim I’d bought it on the sugar route.

“You said you’d be selling magic tools as well. What sort of tools might they be?”

“Oh yeah. I’ll give you some samples of those, too.”

I presented them with five Magic Swords and Spears, then a few varieties of magic potions.

The weapons were of the first generation of my hand-forged creations, the kind that were easy to mass-produce. The swords were the same model as the Magic Sword Akatsuki, which had sold at the dark auction in the old capital and which Viscount Siemmen had showed off to General Erthal.

The spears were virtually the same as the swords, except that their handles were made from Mountain-Tree branches.

“Th-these are the swords with high magic power efficiency that have been circulating recently in the Ougoch Duchy!”

“I see. So you made these swords as well, Lord Nanashi.”

The designs were the same—the king and the prime minister figured it out right away.

“Yeah, there’ve been a lot of demons lately, so I figured they’d be good for protecting the kingdom and stuff, right?”

“Y-yes! If we could equip our skilled knights with such fine Magic Swords as these...” The prime minister paused. “...W-wait, were you planning on selling a lot of these, as well?”

“Yep.”

If you consider a hundred or so each “a lot” anyway.

“Want me to prioritize Your Majesty and the royal army for these, too?”

“Y-yes, please, if you would be so kind...!”

The prime minister bowed his head in supplication.

“Yeah, sure. When I sell ’em wholesale, I’ll go to you guys first. But I did want to make ’em one of my company’s featured products, so is it okay if we sell just a few per month there?”

“V-very well. As you wish, anc—er, Lord Nanashi.”

Once again, the prime minister almost called me “ancestral king.”

“I have no intention of becoming a merchant of death, though. I won’t be selling Magic Guns or big golems or anything like that, ’kay?”

“But of course. We shan’t go against your desires, O great ancestral king.”

I threw in that disclaimer to be safe, but from the looks of the two of them, it was probably fine.

They’d full-on called me “ancestral king” that time, but I let it slide.

“How much should I sell these for?”

“You will likely need about three hundred gold coins apiece for the mithril swords—no, perhaps five hundred.”

“No way.”

That would be highway robbery.

“But, Lord Nanashi—”

“The mithril alloy is only a coating; they’re bronze on the inside. I’d say they should be two hundred gold coins at the very most.”

“But, Lord Nanashi, the Magic Sword Akatsuki that the Ougoch Duchy possesses...”

The big noble families had been searching for more of that sword so frantically that they’d even put out a reward, offering anywhere from three hundred to five hundred gold coins.

Magic Swords found in the labyrinth started at around two hundred gold coins, so by those standards, three hundred gold coins was apparently a good price.

“All right, then I’ll sell them for that at the company, but I’ll only charge two hundred apiece when I sell them to you.”

They cost only about five coins apiece to produce, and I could make around a hundred per hour. I didn’t feel right selling them for so much.

“How many d’you want? I’ve got about a hundred Magic Swords and two hundred Magic Spears...”

I was trying to imply with my tone that they surely didn’t need that many, but

the king promptly bought them all. That was a huge sale of sixty thousand gold coins in total.

My goal here wasn't to get rich quick, so maybe I could use these profits for the industrial betterment of the Shiga Kingdom?

Next, we discussed the magic potions I'd offered.

"These potions are strange—I mean, quite unique."

The prime minister looked at the lineup of potions curiously.

Instead of health-and magic-recovery potions for combat, I'd brought energy potions, nutrient tonics, nutritional supplement potions, hair-growth tonics, and other such things that I thought would be in high demand in the royal capital.

I offered a good amount of the nutrient tonics to the king and the prime minister as samples.

"Yeah, they're pretty practical, right?"

"It truly demonstrates the depth of your compassion, O great ancestral king."

"I keep telling you, I'm Nanashi the Hero..."

"Yes, of course." The king nodded.

I decided to wrap things up without denying it any further.

I planned to deliver the goods via one of the large airships, so they paid me on the spot.

"All right, I'll be going, then. If anyone from my company comes to you for help, I'm counting on you to take care of 'em. Thanks..."

The two rulers immediately agreed to my request.

"Lord Nanashi..."

When the king looked like he wanted to say something else, I replied "Yesss?" in a Tama-like tone.

"If a demon lord should appear in our kingdom—"

"Don't worry—I'll take 'em down if I see any."

I didn't want to go straight to fighting if the other party was willing to talk, but judging by my interactions with the Golden Boar Lord in the old capital and the other greater demons I'd met so far, I was guessing it'd end with a fight.

"Why, is that supposed to happen somewhere?"

"It was predicted a few months ago in Labyrinth City Celivera and more recently in the great desert to the west."

I'd already crushed the green greater demon's plot for the former, and I was pretty sure the latter was just a misunderstanding stemming from my contract with the City Cores.

"All right, I'll keep an eye out. If you get any new info, relay it to me through the folks from my company, 'kay?"

With that, I excused myself from the king's room.

Now I had a way of getting information regularly from the king and the prime minister, but I was going to have to find a means of communication between the royal capital and Labyrinth City, or there wouldn't be much point.



"Eluterina, my master gave me this."

I handed the blond noblewoman the medallion and the trade license from the king.

"It's handwritten?"

"Apparently, it's straight from His Majesty himself. The official paperwork will be sent to the storefront we rented in the next few days."

""""I-it's signed by His Majesty!""""

The noblewomen all let out a cry as they peered at it.

According to them, just having a handwritten license from the king was enough to earn value and prestige for your company.

"And this medallion?"

"I-it can't be!"

One of the merchant girls stared up at me with her eyes practically popping out.

“It means we’re approved to sell to the government. Just bring it with you to the royal castle.”

“I—I knew it!”

The merchant girl shielded her face with her arm, as if the medallion were emitting a powerful light.

She’s so dramatic.

While I was at it, I decided to appoint my proxy for the newly christened Echigoya Company.

“Eluterina, I want you to be in charge of Echigoya.”

“M-me, in charge?”

“That’s right.”

We would likely be selling to the kingdom and countless nobles, so I thought her connections and in-depth knowledge about the nobles would make her perfect for the job.

“Will you do it?”

“Yes, I swear on my life that I will make Echigoya Company the greatest trading company in all of the Shiga Kingdom!”

She certainly seemed motivated.

There was no need to go that far, but I appreciated her enthusiasm. I patted her on the shoulder and said, “I’m looking forward to it.”

People are molded by their circumstances, so maybe I should call her Miss Manager instead of Eluterina or “the blond noblewoman” from now on.

“Tifaleeza, you’ll be in charge of paperwork and accounting. Support Miss Manager here, please.”

I decided to make the girls here into management candidates for Echigoya Company, as well as Polina and “Miss Elder Sister” Sumina, who were holding down the fort in Labyrinth City.

“Yes, Lord Kuro!”

I gave the coolheaded Tifaleeza some notes from my meeting with the king and the prime minister.

“What’s this, Lord Kuro?”

“Your first job. My master made some sales to His Majesty and the prime minister. I’ll deliver the goods myself, but I’d like you to take care of the formalities.”

Tifaleeza’s face grew even paler as she skimmed the documents.

“Erm, Lord Kuro? It says here that we’re selling five large airships, twenty small airships, a hundred Magic Swords, and two hundred Magic Spears...?”

She turned her head toward me so stiffly, I could almost imagine a creaking noise.

“Oh, sorry. That’s not right.”

“...I knew it.”

Tifaleeza breathed a little sigh of relief.

“We’re giving them one of the large airships as a sample, so take that off the list. They’ll be figuring out the prices for the rest of the airships once they’ve seen the sample.”

At that, Tifaleeza and the other girls all froze.

Maybe this was too big for their first order?

“That’s impossible!”

There was a rare note of emotion in Tifaleeza’s voice.

“Don’t worry—I won’t be using this to set a quota or anything.”

“A quota? No, that’s not the problem.” Miss Manager stepped forward. “We simply do not have the power to sell such things as airships and Magic Swords.”

“What do you mean?”

We had permission and the goods to match. What could be the problem?

“We cannot protect such goods from influential nobles or spies from other

kingdoms.”

...I see.

That hadn’t occurred to me.

Even with the kingdom’s backing, there might be ill-intentioned nobles skirting the law or even forces beyond the kingdom’s reach trying to interfere.

“All right. I’ll take care of sales like this myself for now.”

Maybe once my group was able to defeat a floormaster, I could bring the Echigoya Company management to the labyrinth and get them to level 30 or so with some special training.

For now, until I could provide them with proper guards, I would use Create Earth Servant to set up some stone golems and horses to protect the place.

“Sorry, Miss Manager, but could you find a place in the royal capital where we can build large airships?”

It’d be a pain to go all the way to Bolenan Forest every day to build them, so making them directly in the city would make life a lot easier.

Besides, it was probably better to hire shipbuilding specialists to create the hull, rigging, and so on, instead of doing it all myself. That would create more jobs anyway.

“V-very well. What sort of shipbuilding equipment will we need?”

“As long as it’s big enough, that won’t be a problem.”

I could easily create what we needed with Earth Magic.

“All right, I’ll leave the rest in your hands.”

I shifted away from the girls and opened the magic menu.

“Oh, one more thing...”

As I turned around to tell them something I’d forgotten, they all froze again.

“About a month from now, we’ll be getting a big mansion in the noble district from the king. Use the storefront we reserved for now. If we start selling to nobles, we can use the new mansion for that, too.”

“Understood.”

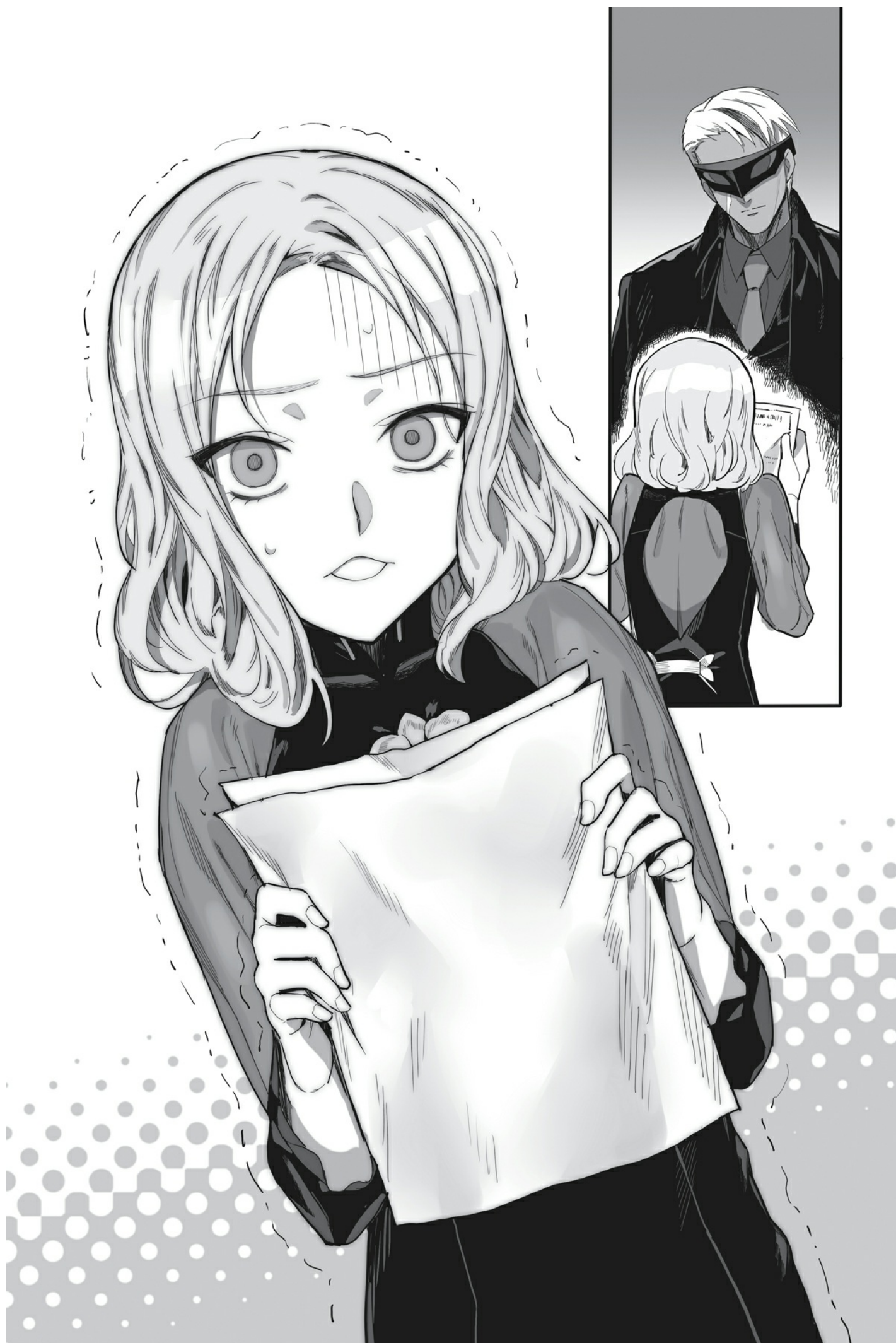
Miss Manager nodded, looking relieved.

I guess the news of the mansion wasn't enough to surprise them.

Feeling mildly disappointed by the lack of reaction, I used the Return spell to head back to Labyrinth City.

> Title Acquired: Arms Dealer

> Title Acquired: Purveyor to the Government



The Eight Swordsmen of Shiga

Satou here. I like attractive older women, especially the type who are normally straitlaced but occasionally show a glimpse of vulnerability. Gap moe is great, isn't it?

"Young master!"

I turned in the direction of the voice to see Neru, sweating in a tank top as she grilled *takoyaki*.

I waved and walked over to her stall with the rest of my group.

"Hello, Neru. You're setting up shop near the airship docking area today?"

"You know it! With the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga visiting Labyrinth City, we're sure to make bank!"

Neru flashed a smile with a single protruding canine, gesturing at the crowd that had gathered in the airship docking area in the west of Labyrinth City.

Word on the street was that some of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga were coming from the royal capital today to investigate the *A mighty king shall appear who reigns over the sea of sand* prophecy.

Beyond the mountains that surrounded Labyrinth City, a large airship was coming into view.

"Nerucchi, I'll take one order of *takoyaki* with mayo and no seaweed, please."

"What's 'mayo'? It's not as tasty without sauce, y'know."

"Oh, right, there's no mayo yet. With sauce, then, please."

Arisa was already buying snacks.

I was sure Tama's signboard masterpiece "Twirling Takoyaki" had roused her appetite.

"Mew?"

“What’s the matter, Tama?”

“Something’s weeeird?”

“What? The skewers are delicious, sir.”

The beastfolk girls were digging into some meat skewers.

Mia, Nana, and Lulu were snacking on fries, too.

Food cart snacks are irresistible even when you’re not hungry.

“Hmm? You’re here to welcome them, too, Sir Pendragon?”

The foxfolk officer appeared from the crowd with a chicken skewer in hand, accompanying his captain as usual.

“Good afternoon. We’re here to observe—that’s all.”

“Ooh, I see. Maybe we should just watch, too?”

“You know we can’t do that, idiot!”

The captain bopped the foxfolk man with his fist.

It felt like it’d been a while since I’d seen this little routine.

“Ouchie! You’re so cruel, Captain. Weren’t you wishing for the same thing a few minutes ago?”

“That’s got nothing to do with this. Don’t even think about trying to sneak off on your own.”

The duo was here on official business, to greet the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga as representatives of His Excellency the general.

“Want to come with us, Sir Pendragon? We can introduce you.”

“Indeed. I’m certain it will only be Sir Heim the Weedy or Lady Ryuona the Grass Cutter.”

Unfortunately, it wasn’t going to be either of those two.

Also, those seemed like pretty rude nicknames for such elite knights...

“Then I’m sure General Erthal will be drinking with them later. I might as well wait until then.”

I tried to refuse, but the captain and the foxfolk officer insisted, then ended up dragging me over to the front line to greet them.

It appeared that only people who were invited there on business were allowed into the fenced-off welcome area, not ordinary citizens or even nobles without business there.

“Sir Satou!”

A young voice called out to me from the crowd.

It was Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom, with her stoic knight in tow.

Behind her, I saw the viceroy’s third son, Gerits, accompanied by his usual hangers-on and a guard from the viceroy.

“Thou art here to welcome the Shiga Eight as well, no?”

“Yes, Sir Kinkuri and company invited me along.”

Using my trusty “Poker Face” skill to hide my reluctance, I responded to Princess Meetia with an equally bright smile.

“Indeed? Sir Gerits here is representing the viceroy, and he was kind enough to bring me at my insistence.”

Behind them was the middle-aged government official I’d met when we first came to Labyrinth City, who was probably the real guide in charge.

“Ahem, ahem.”

Luram, the son of Baron Tokey, cleared his throat in a painfully obvious bid for my attention.

Because he was a regular customer of the food stalls that Neru and the other girls ran, I saw him fairly often.

“Sir Pendragon, when might you be opening the explorers’ school? Lord Gerits was quite worried about it, so please answer for his sake.”

“Did thou say an explorers’ school?”

“Yes, or at least a series of lectures for nobles.”

Gerits and the other nobles, including Princess Meetia, all looked at me

eagerly.

I remembered the guildmaster's words: *We've had some kids around, like the princess from that little country and the viceroy's third son, to ask when we're planning to start classes for nobles or a young explorers' school.*

"Could you not simply hire instructors to come to your homes instead of waiting for the nobles' classes to begin?" I asked.

Even if I did start a course just for nobles, I would probably prioritize the poorer kids who couldn't afford to hire private instructors.

"But then there'd be no point," Gerits answered immediately.

"What do you mean?"

"All they would do is flatter us without ever letting us train for real. Alternatively, they would simply tell us stories of their own adventures in the labyrinth."

This time, it was Baronet Dyukeli's daughter Mary-Ann who answered me.

That was probably true for the children of the noble families who controlled Labyrinth City, I supposed. Any instructors who brought their kids into the labyrinth and risked endangering them would face serious repercussions.

"I know! Thou ought to teach us instead, Sir Satou!"

"Great idea, Princess Meetia! Sir Knight has ventured deep into the labyrinth many a time!"

Princess Meetia made an unfortunate proposal, and Mary-Ann agreed, her cheeks flushing.

For a second, Gerits glanced at Mary-Ann, looking unhappy.

"Y-yes, I suppose Sir Pendragon is a garnet-badge explorer."

"He'd be perfect."

The rest of Gerits's gang of noble kids started chiming in. I didn't like where this was going.

"...No, we can't do that!"

Gerits suddenly objected loudly, then clamped his mouth shut.

“And why not?”

“B-because...because we just can’t, that’s why!”

Gerits shook his head fervently at his friend’s question.

I was sure he didn’t like that the object of his affection might be harboring a crush on me.

“Do you mind if I chime in?”

I beckoned to the squabbling noble kids to listen.

“I am terribly sorry, but my party and I are in the midst of training to challenge a floormaster after Sir Jelil. Every spare moment is dedicated to those preparations, so as much as it pains me, I cannot accept the position of your teacher. Please try to understand and forgive me.”

I attempted to make my tone as regretful as possible as I declined their request. That last part might’ve been a little over-the-top, but nobody seemed to notice.

The foxfolk officer, who’d been smirking in amusement off to the side, pointed at the airship that was now nearly above us. “Sir Pendragon, they’re landing soon.”

Casting a black shadow over the crowd, the ship slowly began to descend.

As I watched, Arisa tugged on my sleeve.

“Master, Tama’s found some suspicious-looking characters.”

Covering her mouth with her hand, Arisa communicated to me with the Space Magic spell Tactical Talk.

There weren’t any red dots on my radar, but Tama had her eyes on a group of men in gray robes with hoods covering their faces.

According to my AR display, they were merchants from Parion Province. They had titles like **Merchant**, **Shadow Guide**, and **Demon Lord Worshipper**, though all but the first title were being hidden with some kind of recognition-inhibiting item.

In addition, their affiliations read **Ketotuul Company** and **Light of Freedom**. The latter was hidden like the two titles; most likely, it was a similar group to the demon lord–worshipping Wings of Freedom, who had revived a demon lord in the old capital.

Fortunately, they didn't seem to have any dangerous short horns or long horns, items that turn humans into demons.

As far as I could tell from my map search, the eight men here were the only members outside of their base in the trade city Tartumina.

I quickly marked all the demon lord worshippers on my map.

"Sergeant Tama, Sergeant Pochi, I have a mission for you."

"Aye!"

"Sir!"

The two of them saluted enthusiastically.

I warned them to be silent with a lip-zipping gesture, then continued my instructions.

"I'm going to toss the men in gray robes away from the crowd. Once they're unconscious, I want you two to tie them up. Lulu and Nana, make sure the noble kids are safe. Arisa and Mia, you're the lookouts. Liza, be prepared to deal with any unexpected occurrences."

The group nodded discreetly, and Tama and Pochi weaved through the crowd, waiting in the plaza beyond.

"We'll begin as soon as the airship lands and the visitors start coming down the ramp."

That was probably when this group was planning to make their move.

I used the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to keep a bird's-eye view on the situation.

"Looks like they're sending out Holy Knights first."

As the foxfolk officer murmured, four Holy Knights marched briskly down the ramp, lining up at the bottom to await their master.

Two of them were equipped with the Magic Swords I'd given to the kingdom as samples.

"Hmm, so it's not Sir Heim or Lady Ryuona. It's Lady Helmina the Uptight..."

The captain's observation was drowned out by cheers from the crowd.

At the same time, the demon lord worshippers nodded to one another.

"Go time."

Signaling my group with Tactical Talk, I used Magic Hand to grab each of the demon lord worshippers and toss them into the plaza where Tama and Pochi were waiting.

The men shrieked, but their voices were lost among the screaming crowd.

The only people who noticed them flying through the air were a handful of people at the back and Miss Helmina of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga.

Only one of them had the "Item Box" skill, so I made sure to slam him into the ground to ensure he was knocked unconscious, instead of just tossing him like the rest.

There was no telling if he was hiding any short or long horns in his Item Box.

Hmm?

It was faint, but my "Sense Danger" skill warned me of something in the direction of the airship.

I looked up and saw a red point appear on my radar at the same time.

The dot was right behind Miss Helmina, who whirled around before my eyes.

A spiky arm lashed out and sent her flying.

As she trailed blood in the air, the creature who'd struck her—a level-45 intermediate demon—broke through the airship's hatch and flew after her.

"Liza, come with me!"

Without waiting for an answer, I broke into a run, jumped lightly, and caught Miss Helmina in midair.

"Yes, sir!" Liza leaped between us and the oncoming bristly demon.

Gwooooooryleeee.

Howling, the six-armed bristly demon glowed silver.

He appeared to have used something that improved his defense.

“...Urgh. What was that?”

In my arms, Helmina recovered from her momentary daze.

Gwooooooryleeee.

The bristly demon howled again.

“An enemy.”

I dodged the stone spears that sprang up from the ground as I answered.

They were being produced by the bristly demon’s Earth Magic.

Once I finished dodging, I put Miss Helmina down on the ground.

The four Holy Knights had run up to where Liza was facing off with the bristly demon, so I gestured for her to fall back.

“That’s the thing that struck you from behind, Lady Helmina.”

“I see. I suppose you saved me, then... <Open.>”

Using the “Item Box” skill, Helmina produced the gun I’d seen on her back before.

“As thanks, I’ll show you how a Swordsman of Shiga fights.”

“Allow me to provide some small assistance, then.”

“Assistance?” Helmina blinked at me, then grinned. “You’re not half-bad.”

I’m glad you seem so unruffled, but your knights are in trouble over there.

The Holy Knights’ mithril swords and Magic Swords couldn’t break through the demon’s bristly fur, but his claws were tearing through their shields and armor with ease.

He seemed to excel at close combat.

“Sir Pendragon! That’s an intermediate demon! Stay away while we go get the general and the guildmaster!” the foxfolk officer shouted.

Behind me, the captain was evacuating the nobles and citizens.

“Did he say ‘intermediate’? How unlucky.”

Helmina briskly removed some ammunition from her gun and loaded it with different bullets from her Item Box. These ones had glittering gemstones affixed to them.

Her rifle at the ready, the woman charged it with magic.

As I kept an eye on her, Liza and I fended off the stone bullets that occasionally flew toward us from the bristly demon.

“Very unlucky indeed...”

The amount of magic in her rifle suddenly intensified.

She must be planning to unleash some big attack right away.

“...to end up having me as your opponent.”

With confidence all over her face, Miss Helmina put her finger on the trigger.

“<*Pierce*>—Water Butterfly Gun!!”

At the key word *pierce*, water droplets appeared surrounding her rifle, forming a whirlpool that swirled around the muzzle.

When she pulled the trigger, a bullet exploded out at incredible speed, almost as if the spiraling water had accelerated it.

The bullet left a streak of blue behind it as it sped toward the bristly demon’s forehead— And missed.

The demon twisted himself out of the way right before the bullet struck, sacrificing one of his arms but avoiding a fatal wound.

Still, her bullets could clearly break through the bristly demon’s silver fur.

Gwoolyelyelyeee.

“I’m impressed he dodged that—wait, there are more?”

After a twitch of her eyebrows, Helmina’s expression turned to one of astonishment.

Five more demons identical to the first one had appeared around him.

According to my AR, the new ones were copies of the first, all around level 30 with skills specializing in close combat.

“Master, there are more demons now. Will you be all right?”

“It’s fine. They’re just lesser demons around level thirty.”

“I guess that’ll be all right, then. Should we keep evacuating civilians for now?”

“Sorry, but yes, please. Liza, you and I will keep backing up the Shiga Eight.”

“Understood.”

We quickly discussed our strategy with Tactical Talk.

“Damn demons!”

“These ones are strong, too.”

“It’s not an illusion?”

“Grrr...”

The bristly demon sent one copy after each of the Holy Knights surrounding him, then took the last one along to charge toward us—specifically, Miss Helmina.

“I’ll take one of them.”

“Be careful.”

Helmina agreed to my proposal without even a glance.

Then, flinging the Water Butterfly Gun into her Item Box, she produced two pistols instead.

Each of them had a small bayonet blade. They were so cool that I almost slipped back into my nerdy middle school fantasy phase.

“Don’t assume that a shooter like me can’t handle close combat.”

As the demons closed in, she fired with her pistols one after another.

I guess hitting them with the recoil or jumping around wouldn’t be all that practical.

These bullets didn't seem to pack as much of a punch; the demon was able to ward them off with his arm as a shield.

"I'll be your opponent."

I parried the copy's attack with my fairy sword, grabbed him by his fur, and tossed him to Liza.

Glancing over at the Holy Knights, I saw that the pair with the Magic Swords was doing decent damage against the copies, so I decided to focus my Magic Hand on supporting the other two.

"Liza, keep the demon in place."

"Understood."

Liza's Magic Spear pinned the demon copy to the ground before he could stand.

Beyond her, I saw Helmina bend backward nimbly to dodge a punch from the bristly demon.

"<Reload,> armor-piercing ammunition."

At Miss Helmina's words, the two pistols glowed.

Clearly, she was able to reload them with a single action, just like in some first-person shooters.

Although it'd still be easier to use a Magic Gun than going to the trouble of loading real bullets.

Still bent backward, Miss Helmina shot at the bristly demon from below as he jumped toward her.

...Ouch.

The bullets pummeled into an area that made me wince, and the bristly demon howled a different kind of scream.

I guess even demons have a weak point there.

"Master!" Liza cried.

One of the copies had knocked his Holy Knight aside and was barging toward

the fleeing crowd.

Princess Meetia's knight and the viceroy's guards had their hands full keeping their respective charges safe, so I couldn't count on them to help.

"Dimension Snare, sneaky mode!"

Arisa used a chant-less Space Magic spell to trip up the demon copy.

"Take this!"

Lulu fired into his eyes with her Fire Rod rifle.

The copy tried to dodge with the same superhuman reflexes as the bristly demon, but since his legs were tangled up in Arisa's magic, he couldn't dodge fast enough to avoid his ears being burned.

A throwing knife imbued with "Spellblade" flew from somewhere beyond the crowd and pierced one of the demon's eyes, and Lulu's second shot hit the other. The former must have been thrown by Tama.

Gwogworlyzeeee.

"Shield Bash, I declare."

As the copy screeched, Nana pummeled her buckler into his torso.

"You guys take care of that one. Keep it busy for a bit and then finish it off."

"Okey-dokey. I don't like to toy with my opponents, but I will if it's an order from you, master."

Arisa responded with a heroic-sounding line.

It was probably safe to leave that copy in their hands.

A little ways away, I could see one of the other copies send a Holy Knight flying, and I started to run.

Leaving Liza to take care of the copy we'd been fighting, I ran to stop the one that had just broken off.

It was hard not to use "Warp" or "Blink" when I was in a hurry, especially when lives were on the line.

"I'll be your opponent."

I slashed into the copy's back with my fairy sword. As he whirled around to swing a fist at me, I dodged his attack and kicked his exposed torso to send him tumbling toward Miss Helmina. The demon copy kicked up rubble as he plunged across the ground.

"<Pierce>—Water Butterfly Gun!!"

Having switched back to her rifle, Miss Helmina shot the copy in the head.

My kick already reducing his health, he turned into black dust and vanished.

"Impressive as always, Lady Helmina."

"No need to fear demons as long as we have one of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga on our side!"

Witnessing the copy's defeat, the Holy Knights cheered.

They were covered in dirt, blood, and scrapes, but they were still bursting with morale.

"Aaaaah!"

Right after shooting down the copy, Miss Helmina took a hit from the bristly demon and tumbled across the ground.

She had suffered only a single strike, yet her health was reduced by half.

The demon charged over to finish her off, his fearsome claws glowing red.

I don't think so.

I sped to her as fast as I could without using "Blink" and dealt a flying kick to the bristly demon's side.

I was careful to hold back so I wouldn't kill him in one blow, but the bristly demon showed his ultrafast reflexes again and avoided a clean hit.

Gwolye.

Staggering back, the demon glared at me and took a guarded stance.

The three arms on one of his sides sagged limply, and his fur's silver glow was fading on that side.

I guess my kick did more damage than I thought.

Gwoooooryleee.

As he howled, Miss Helmina's bullets pummeled into his side.

The bristly demon reacted in time to protect his head, but the faded arms were destroyed easily, and he took a large amount of damage.

Miss Helmina's defenses might be paper-thin, but evidently, her attack power was extremely high.

"Leave this to us. You protect Lady Helmina."

"All right. Just don't die."

Exchanging lines that definitely seemed like death flags, the two Holy Knights came to Miss Helmina's aid.

The other two Holy Knights seemed like they were in danger of being killed by the copies any moment now.

"I'm sorry, master."

When I heard Liza's apology and turned around, I saw the copy she'd been fighting turning to black dust.

She must have accidentally defeated him when she was trying to hold back.

"We took our guy down by mistake, too."

The copy Arisa and the others had been dealing with was destroyed around the same time as Liza's.

Perfect timing.

"That's all right. More importantly, go take on the two copies the Holy Knights are fighting, please. Tama and Pochi, can you come over here, too?"

"Okey-dokey!"

"We already turned in the bad guys to the police, sir."

According to my map information, the viceroy's guards had surrounded the demon lord worshippers. They could probably handle things from there.

"Lulu, protect Arisa and the girls in Nana's place, please. Nana, come over here."

The group all cheerfully agreed.

“We’ll take care of these two. Go and help Lady Helmina, please.”

“Don’t be absurd. These are demons!”

“They’re on another level from labyrinth monsters.”

The noble Holy Knights were reluctant to let us fight the demons in their place.

“Gorillas belong in a zoo, I declare.”

Nana made an expressionless “Taunt,” drawing the two demon copies’ attention away from the knights.

“Take this!”

“And this, sir.”

Tama and Pochi ran over with their Magic Swords flashing red, slamming into the two copies like bullets.

The Holy Knights gaped at them in disbelief.

“See? We can handle this.”

“R-right.”

“Okay then.”

Clearly still shocked by the scene, the Holy Knights agreed to withdraw.

Just then, Mia’s Healing Magic quickly restored the knights’ wounds.

“Thank you.”

“Be careful.”

With that, the two Holy Knights ran over to Miss Helmina.

The only remaining enemies were the bristly demon that Helmina was fighting and the two copies that we were now dealing with.

“Nana, keep one of them distracted, and, Arisa, you obliterate him with Fire Magic. Liza, make sure the other one doesn’t get away.”

Once I’d given these orders, I turned to check on Helmina.

The Holy Knights had surrounded the bristly demon to keep him pinned in place, and Helmina was shooting at him from behind them, whittling down his health.

She was surrounded by the glimmering glow of defensive Light Magic spells like Ray Shield and Ray Ring Armor.

Gwoooooorlyeee.

The bristly demon cast the Toss Stone spell around himself, blowing the knights backward and sending a fresh spray of blood into the air.

“We’re not done yet!”

“A Holy Knight shield doesn’t break so easily!”

The gutsy Holy Knights shouted battle cries as they charged back to the front lines.

“Reckless,” Mia grumbled, healing them again with magic.

“““■ ■ **Ray Shield** Koujun!”””

In unison, the Holy Knights cast the Light Magic spell Ray Shield on top of their physical shields.

Their powerful defensive Light Magic wasn’t the only reason they were able to serve as tanks so well despite their levels ranging from 32 to 37.

They were wearing top-quality armor and helmets, and they were loaded with defense-oriented skills like “Indestructible Body” and “Parry.”

“Hefu, cool it with the over-ambition.”

“Maybe you should try working without gawking at Lady Helmina, Lakas.”

“Hefu, Lakas, enough chitchat.”

Gwoooooorlyeee.

“It’s preparing an area attack. Get ready!”

The Holy Knights strengthened their defenses with skills and Light Magic.

They seemed to use the official sword style of the Shiga Kingdom, so I thought I’d get another chance to see the Cherry Blossom Flash technique the viceroy’s

guardian knight had used before, but they seemed to specialize more in creating openings for Miss Helmina to attack than doing the attacking themselves.

I had managed to reproduce the Cherry Blossom Flash technique myself, but the Spellblade fragments that were supposed to make the cherry blossom petals come out big and red when I did it, so it was more like a Rose Flash.

I'd been hoping to see it again so I could figure out what I was doing wrong.

Behind me, there was a loud *whoosh* and a wave of heat. Turning around, I saw that Arisa's flames had burned one copy away into black dust.

The other copy was on the verge of death, too; Pochi wasn't very good at holding back.

"Master!"

With my "Keen Hearing" skill, I heard Arisa's scream amid the roaring noise of the flames.

The bristly demon was right in front of me, holding his three working arms aloft.

He must have closed in on me while I was distracted for a moment.

"Cherry Blossom Flash!"

...*Oops.*

Since I had been thinking about the Cherry Blossom Flash just moments ago, I accidentally whipped out my imitation version on the spot.

Red light fragments scattered from my fairy sword like rose petals.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the bristly demon's health bar plummeting downward.

"<Pierce>—Magic Bullet Massacre!"

Just then, Miss Helmina's finishing move struck.

Two light bullets closed in on the demon, surrounded by a sparkling spiral, and struck the back of the bristly demon's head. It was a pretty impressive move.

The headless bristly demon fell to the ground and disintegrated into black dust.

The copy that my companions were fighting disappeared when the main body was destroyed, too.

Now, what excuse was I going to make for the Cherry Blossom Flash?





“Thank you. You were a huge help. I am Helmina Kiriku of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga.”

Miss Helmina donned a cloak from her Item Box to cover her tattered clothes.

“I’m glad we were able to be of some assistance. I am Satou Pendragon, hereditary knight of the Muno Barony.”

Even sweating like a waterfall, Miss Helmina still introduced herself smoothly, so I did the same.

For some reason, she blinked in surprise at my introduction.

I didn’t want to rock the boat by questioning it, though. I just handed her an absorbent sweat towel from my Garage Bag and waited for her to speak.

“Thank you. By ‘Muno,’ do you mean *that* Muno territory?”

This was probably a polite way of asking *the cursed territory?* so I nodded.

“Yes, that’s right. The bravery of Baron Muno has cleared the curse from his land.”

I went on to explain that the Undead King Zen had laid the curse on the area out of a grudge toward the former marquis Muno, but he had already been exorcised.

Judging by her name, she was probably related to the noble family of Kiriku County to the southeast of the trade city Tartumina, and she was a charismatic member of the influential Eight Swordsmen of Shiga, so I was hoping she would spread the word for us.

“So you’re a knight of the Muno Barony? Are you in Labyrinth City to sell cores, then, or perhaps to become an explorer?”

“Not exactly. I’m staying here awhile to train my compatriots.”

It felt a bit like an interrogation, but I could tell she didn’t mean any harm, so I responded honestly.

“Are your Holy Knights all right?” I asked.

“Yes, they’ll be fine, thanks to the healing from one of your friends. They’ve been through worse.”

The wimpy-looking Garleon priest traveling with them was casting Healing Magic on the battle-worn Holy Knights.

“Besides, our priest Jeida is well-known in the capital for his healing arts, so he can...”

Helmina suddenly staggered. I caught her just in time.

I felt something wet on my hand and assumed it was sweat, but my palm was red where I’d touched her.

“That seems like a pretty severe wound.”

“It’s nothing to concern yourself over. The Light Magic has all but closed it up already.”

She was putting on a brave face, but according to my AR, her health gauge was still 70 percent of the way down.

If it was still this bad after recovering, she must have lost a lot of blood in battle.

“Who are those men?” Miss Helmina asked, noticing the demon lord worshippers being arrested by the guards. We went over to look.

The captain and the foxfolk officer approached.

“Good work, Sir Pendragon. What would we do without you?”

“Have you figured out who they are?”

“Hmm? Didn’t you capture them because you knew they were demon lord worshippers, Sir—?”

Miss Helmina anxiously interrupted. “Demon lord worshippers? You knew about this, Sir Pendragon?”

I couldn’t blame her for being surprised, since she’d come to Labyrinth City to investigate a demon-lord-related prophecy.

“No, I was just keeping an eye on them because they looked suspicious. Then they took out some kind of drugs, so I went ahead and captured them.”

“I see...”

She seemed a little disappointed by my answer.

I explained the situation to General Erthal and the guildmaster once they arrived, and we decided to talk to the viceroy about it after we delivered the demon lord worshippers to the prison.

“...I see.”

“I knew I saw promise in you, Sir Pendragon. You never disappoint.”

When we explained what had happened to the pair, the viceroy’s wife looked as pleased as if she’d taken care of things herself.

General Erthal and the guildmaster nodded with satisfaction, too. They seemed to be proud that their younger drinking buddy was pulling his weight.

“So where did this intermediate demon come from?”

“Well, according to witnesses...”

Helmina answered the viceroy’s question.

Witnesses reported that one of the slaves on the airship had taken out a hidden purple egg from their Item Box and thrown it, producing a magic circle from which the demon appeared.

“If he was a slave, there must be a master behind him, right? Have they been arrested?”

“Yes, along with all his slaves.”

This group was apparently in the magic-sealing prison underneath the viceroy’s offices, along with the demon lord worshippers.

“Your Excellency...”

One of the viceroy’s guards ran up to the viceroy and whispered in his ear.

“We forced one to open his Item Box and found some of those *horns* inside.”

A horn—it was likely a short horn or long horn that could turn people into demons.

“The short kind?”

“No, there were five of those, but one of the long ones as well.”

The two were whispering, but I overheard it all with my “Keen Hearing” skill.

Good thing I nipped that in the bud.

If five lesser demons and another intermediate demon had appeared in the crowd in the midst of that situation, I doubt I could have kept everyone safe without revealing my full power.

“Do we know who these insurgents are?”

“According to the ‘Analyze’ results from the Yamato stone you lent us, they belong to a group called Light of Freedom that’s been spreading on the western side of the continent.”

The west—if I remembered right, Hayato the Hero was currently on business there, so he would probably clean up this group while he was investigating demon lord rumors.

“I see... So we’ve been invaded by a group from another province.”

“If only there were someone to fill Poputema’s shoes...”

The viceroy and his wife murmured among themselves.

The former Counselor Poputema, also known as the “noble in green,” had apparently left a huge hole as the head of intelligence.

“Is there some new information?”

Once the couple’s conversation trailed off, Miss Helmina spoke to them.

The viceroy beckoned Helmina, General Erthal, and the guildmaster closer and relayed the information I’d just heard.

“That is grave news indeed. If there had been any more demons on the scene back there, I doubt even I could have taken them down.”

The viceroy’s wife chuckled. “So on top of saving Labyrinth City from great peril, our Sir Pendragon even protected Lady Helmina of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga in combat!”

Judging by the pleased look on her face, this was likely to come up at the next tea party.

“Yes, with the strength he showed me, I’d wager he could be nominated for the Shiga Eight himself.”

At that, a murmur ran through her Holy Knights and the viceroy’s guards who were in attendance.

I guess being nominated for the Shiga Eight was a pretty big deal.

“Oh my.”

“Hmm.”

The viceroy’s wife and General Erthal, familiar with my goals, sent a “what do you want to do?” look my way. The guildmaster, meanwhile, was smirking at the prospect of ratting me out over drinks this evening.

“...Or could it be that you do not wish to be nominated?”

I was using my “Poker Face” skill to keep a calm expression as I worried over how to politely decline, but Miss Helmina saw right through me.

“Ridiculous.”

“Who would turn down such an offer?”

“Agreed.”

“He was crazy enough to jump into battle with an intermediate demon without even any armor! He must love fighting.”

The Holy Knights all murmured in disbelief.

I had a thing or two to say about that last comment, but instead, I nodded at Helmina’s inquiry.

“...Quite an odd one, aren’t you?”

That seemed rude to me, but everyone else in the room nodded in agreement with her.

Come on—what’s wrong with not wanting fame and glory?



“Lovely weather today.”

Three days after the incident, we were seeing off Miss Helmina and company

as they headed into the desert to investigate.

In the days since, Baron Dovun of the royal capital—the master of the slave who'd thrown the purple egg that summoned the intermediate demon—and the members of his group were arrested, and the Parion Province merchant who'd sold the egg to Baron Dovun was captured.

The demon-lord-worshipping Light of Freedom group had headquarters in the trade city Tartumina, so I went there as the Hero's vassal Kuro and dispensed with them myself.

When I arrested them, I gained "Parion Province Language" and many other western-language skills; the group seemed to have sway in a wide range of areas there.

When we went to the western side of the continent to go sightseeing, I had better get rid of this Light of Freedom bunch first.

At any rate, whatever they were trying to do in Labyrinth City had been thwarted, and the royal-capital specialist would likely investigate exactly what their plans had been.

I'd rather leave torture and other such nasty things to the professionals.

"It's a little too bright for me and my hangover..."

One of the Holy Knights shielded his eyes and glowered weakly at the sun.

"Sir Pendragon, thanks again for last night."

"Indeed. I thought that rum was a boorish drink for sailors—who knew it was so delightful?"

"The Ishrallie liqueur cocktail was excellent, too."

"...Sir Pendragon, the title of Heaviest Drinker in the Shiga Kingdom is yours for now. But I won't lose next time."

I'd befriended the Holy Knights at General Erthal's drinking party.

One of them was clutching his head and groaning, but I pretended not to notice.

Besides, I already had the Drunkard title, thanks.

“Certainly. Let us drink together again when you return from your investigation.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

From the high-class to the humble, most military men in this world seemed to enjoy drinking, so handing out liquor was a nearly foolproof way of getting to know them.

I’d enjoyed learning more about the Holy Knights and their adventures, as well as their opinions of other knight groups.

“Hey, looks like they’re done talking over there.”

Miss Helmina, who had been chatting with the viceroy’s wife, General Erthal, and some other officials, came back over to the Holy Knights.

“Sir Pen—”

Noticing me, she started to say my name, then turned red and looked away.

Evidently, she got drunk easily and had a habit of growing clingy when she did so; the mischievous guildmaster had loaded her up with lots of high-proof liquor, and she wound up latching on to me.

She was probably embarrassed about that.

Personally, though, I wasn’t particularly bothered by having a pretty lady hanging off me.

Miss Ringrande of the Hero’s party had done something similar in the old capital. I was starting to think there was something about my face that made me an easy target for drunks.

“Lady Helmina, here. A parting gift.”

“A Water Bag?”

At the drinking party the night before, I’d learned that they weren’t actually taking the airship into the desert—it was just there to carry a sailboat-like vehicle called a “sandboat,” which they’d be using to get around. So I decided to bring them a water source.

“Wow, a Pure-Water Bag, nice!”

The heavily equipped foxfolk officer looked surprised.

It was a magic tool that was sold in Labyrinth City magic-item shops for explorers.

I'd traded the water stone inside for a water pearl, so it should last longer and require less magic power than the ones sold on the market.

"And you brought enough for everyone? You're a lifesaver!"

The foxfolk man took one of the bags and rubbed his cheek against it.

He was going along with the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga party as their desert guide.

At the party last night, he'd complained, "Why do I have to be the guide? I'm the army's analyst!" and received a sharp "Quit whining! You know the desert better than anyone!" along with a bop on the head from his captain.

Looking away from the poor soul now, I turned toward Miss Helmina.

"There aren't any watering holes in the desert, so please hold on to these in case of emergency."

"Thank you, Sir Pendragon."

Accepting the Pure-Water Bags, Helmina shook my hand.

Then she leaned over and brought her lips close to my ear.

I heard Arisa and Mia muttering the word "*cheating?*" to each other from behind me, but I insist that I'm innocent.

After all, I only have eyes for Miss Aaze, the high elf of Bolenan Forest.

"Sir Pendragon, I'll use a magic tool to send a signal to the watchtower in the mountains to the west every day at noon. If ever the signal fails to come, it means something's happened to me—most likely, it will mean that we ran into the demon lord and lost. If that happens, don't come looking, even if they ask you to. Just run away. Have Sir Juleburg—the head of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga—come from the royal capital to take care of it."

With that, she pulled away and went up the ramp into the airship.

I guess she was planning on being the proverbial canary in the coal mines.

“...Well, there won’t be any demon lord showing up anyway,” I murmured quietly as the airship took flight.

I’d had more than enough of demons and demon lords by now anyway.

Still, for the sake of my friends’ safety, maybe I should check the labyrinth’s Lower Stratum just in case?

Competition

Satou here. I think passing an exam is really more of a checkpoint than a goal. Once you pass, you shouldn't let your energy burn out. That's when the real battle begins.

"If you take our party, Falcon Beak, with you, the floormaster won't know what hit it!"

"Sir Gusto of the garnet-badge explorer party Sovereign is offering to lend you his aid! You'd be a fool not to take it!"

"Please include me in your expedition, too, Sir Pendragon!"

A throng of voices clamored outside the mansion.

Ever since a few days after we saw off Miss Helmina and company, word that we'd defeated an areamaster had spread, and people flocked to our home to promote themselves.

Many of them were garnet-badge explorers, but since they weren't in Jelil's group, which was currently fighting a floormaster, or his rival Zarigon's team, most of them weren't all that powerful.

There were a few real contenders mixed in, but most of those tended to have problematic personalities, and I was hoping the whole lot of them would leave.

As I thought about this, I heard the sounds of a quarrel, and then the outside of our home went silent.

Most likely, the guards that the viceroy's wife had kindly sent to patrol our area had removed the offending crowd.

"Master?"

Knocking on the door, Arisa entered my study.

"The carpenter's finished hanging up curtains at the site for the explorers'

school.”

“Great, thanks.”

I was planning to make the school buildings and dormitories for the explorers’ school with Stone Object in the dead of night.

As for the house that was already there, I figured I’d dig it out of the ground with Earth Magic, detach it with Dimension Cutter, and put the whole thing in Storage.

I could easily level a schoolyard for training using the Wall spell, so I would do that while I was making the other structures.

“What are you drawing?”

“A map of the area I want to use for field training.”

I was coming up with a plan to renovate section 11, which was close to the labyrinth entrance yet not very popular, so that our students could get some field experience there.

Incidentally, it was also the area where Princess Meetia, the viceroy’s son Gerits, and the other noble children had been attacked by the Plunderer King Ludaman.

It was a dangerous place: There were monsters like horn hoppers and rock-head bees that were known as “knight killers,” and even worse threats like soldier mantises and war mantises roamed the area as well. Thus, very few explorers made this their stomping grounds.

“Wow, talk about detailed. You’ve got the nests and distribution maps for horn hoppers and rock-head bees, plus the patrol routes of the mantises? This mark must mean watering holes—yikes, and you’ve even marked off an area to make into a safe zone for resting and camping?!”

Skimming the map, Arisa exclaimed in surprise.

“Well, yeah. It’d be possible to make a day trip, but the travel time would be longer than the actual hunting.”

“Hmm. So it’s more on the scale of an inn than a mini labyrinth town, is it?”

“Why make it any bigger than necessary?”

It’d be dangerous to leave people there to manage a place like that, so I wasn’t planning anything fancier than a handful of huts.

“But why are you making such a detailed map?”

“Partly to give it to the instructors in charge of the training but also because I’d like you and the others to go there and reduce the monster population a bit.”

“All right, I suppose. What will you be doing, though?”

“I thought I’d explore the Lower Stratum of the labyrinth while everyone’s getting ready to renovate the area.”

Arisa looked worried. “You’re not going to do anything dangerous on your own again, are you?”

“Of course not. I just want to make sure there aren’t any demons or other dangerous creatures down there.”

“If you say so...”

Patting her on the head as she nodded reluctantly, I promised again not to do anything reckless.

A promise like that might seem like foreshadowing, but I didn’t want to go through anything painful, so I was planning to keep it if at all possible.



“All right, I’ll be back.”

“Be careful.”

At the crossroads in the first area of the labyrinth, I parted ways with my group.

The day after I showed Arisa the map, I took my group—the Saga Empire samurai duo Mr. Kajiro and Miss Ayaume and the Lovely Wings pair who were to be teachers at the explorers’ school—into the labyrinth.

Apart from me, everyone was there to work on developing the practice area for the school.

It was meant to help with Kajiro's physical rehabilitation and the Lovely Wings's training, too.

The previous day, I'd given the map of the area to Arisa and had her use her Space Magic spells like Clairvoyance and Clairaudience to check out the lay of the land and the current state of the monsters, so they should be fine without me.

"...What?"

"You're not coming along, mister?"

"Sir Knight, it's dangerous to go alone. Take me with you."

"If Lord Kajiro is going, I will come along as well."

The four who didn't know about my plans all gathered around me with concern.

"It's all right. I may not look it, but I can handle normal monsters well enough on my own."

"Sir Knight, there is no greater enemy than carelessness, no matter how strong you might be. I beg you, at least take one person along with you."

I thought about Mr. Kajiro's suggestion.

My business shouldn't take long, and once I was done, I wanted to stop by the guild and do some paperwork.

Ideally, I'd like to take Arisa or Liza along, but Arisa was in charge of the map, and I'd prefer Liza to be with the other girls in case they ran into any danger.

"I'll ask Lulu to be my guard, then."

"Y-yes, sir, I'll do my best!"

Kajiro and the others stared at Lulu and her outfit, clearly wondering why I would bring along a maid of all people, but they relented when Liza remarked, "If Lulu's with you there, you'll have nothing to worry about."

Saying my good-byes to the other kids, I walked along the passage with Lulu.

"Lulu, wear this, please."

“What’s this? Oh, a cloak that makes you invisible?”

I nodded and put on another of the transparency cloaks that we’d found in the City Core treasure room.

Now rendered invisible, Lulu and I headed toward the entryway to the largest room of section 1. I was still able to see Lulu, since illusions didn’t work on me, but Lulu couldn’t see me, so I held her hand as we walked.

When we passed the labyrinth army barracks, I picked Lulu up in my arms and used “Warp” to slip through the door at just the right time.

Then, using “Skysrunning,” I carried her down into the pit that led to the Middle Stratum.

“Are you scared?”

“I-I’m fine as long as you’re with me, master.”

Lulu was doing her best to act brave. I lowered the hood of my transparency cloak and smiled at her, continuing our slow descent.

Along the way, we saw some explorers frantically operating the elevator. The pit went all the way down to the Lower Stratum, but the elevator went only to the middle.

Passing the Middle Stratum floor, we kept going down until the display on my radar changed.

“Looks like the Middle Stratum ends here.”

“So this is the labyrinth’s Lower Stratum...” Lulu’s voice trembled.

I patted her head reassuringly, then selected “Search Entire Map” from my magic menu. I tried entering various search queries, looked at the results, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness. No demons or demon lords here.

I’d gotten far stronger since the last time I fought a demon lord, so I could likely hold my own even if a demon lord did actually appear, but I’d rather not put my life in danger too often if I could help it, unless it was to rescue someone I knew.

Maybe I'll investigate a little more while I'm at it?

I searched the map for stronger enemies.

There weren't any areamasters like in the upper and middle floors, but there were definitely strong monsters to be found.

Some of them were far more powerful than anything you'd see in the other stratum, like a group of Evil Dragons with levels as high as 80 and a giant level-99 plant monster called an "elder root." The Lower Stratum seemed to be pretty intense.

These were in areas where they couldn't get out, though, and too large to fit through a spawnhole passage, so as long as the dungeonmaster who controlled the labyrinth didn't get any funny ideas, there was probably nothing to worry about.

The deepest part of the Lower Stratum, where the elder root lurked, seemed to be the end of the labyrinth.

This final room was called a Room of Trials. If someone defeated the last boss-like elder root, I had a feeling the dungeonmaster might appear.

I didn't see the dungeonmaster in my map search, so maybe there was still another area down there.

While I was looking, I searched for reincarnations, demon lord worshippers, and so on, but of course I didn't find any.

"All right, I'm done investigating. Let's go back up, Lulu."

"Y-yes, sir."

Lulu nodded, confused, as I headed back up the pit.

I'd cleared away my worries that there might be demons or a demon lord lurking in the Lower Stratum, and there was no point staying any longer. We returned to Labyrinth City.



"A competition?"

"Yes, I thought it'd be a good way to select scholarship students for the

explorers' school."

In addition to tuition for three months of training, scholarship students would be given free lodging, food, and grants for other living expenses.

"Satou, aren't you busy enough getting ready to challenge a floormaster?"

"True. But since my party isn't strong enough just yet, I'd like to have them train a bit more first."

I couldn't let the girls fight a floormaster until they were all at least level 50.

"I see. Glad to hear you're being cautious. I've seen far too many fools get big heads after defeating an areamaster, only to have their whole group completely wiped out by a floormaster..."

Anguish was an unnatural expression on the guildmaster's face.

"So is it all right if we hold a tournament?"

"You don't need my permission, kid. Knowing you, you've already got it from the viceroy and his wife, right? I'll even let you put up announcements outside the guild and the training grounds to gather applicants."

Oh, she agreed before I could even ask.

"Thank you very much, Guildmaster."

"No problem. You can thank me with food."

"Well, I hunted a maze rabbit not long ago, so how does rabbit meat sound to you?"

"That would be delightful. I'll stock up on some ale and cheap red wine."

The guildmaster volunteered to buy the booze for our next feast.

"I'd love to try deep-fried rabbit," came a cheerful request from Miss Ushana, who was quietly doing paperwork.

She was usually very serious, but the guildmaster seemed to be rubbing off on her.

I readily agreed to her request and headed down to reception to submit a posting about the competition for the bulletin board.

“...Understood. Would you like to use the largest size for the flyer?”

I nodded.

She explained that the price was determined by the size of the flyer and the length of time it would be displayed.

I'd had them take the fee of announcements like the lectures and the scroll collection request out of the reward money I gave, so this was my first time hearing about it.

“Oh-ho, you're making an explorers' school, Master Pendragon?”

A handsome young man with dark-brown skin peered over the receptionist's shoulder.

“E-excuse me! Please don't lean on the desk.”

“Oh, pardon me.”

Lightly apologizing as he withdrew, the man turned toward me and bowed.

“Sarishusas the minstrel at your service. How would you like to hire me to read your announcement aloud and spread the word?”

Evidently, he was here to offer his services.

I glanced at the receptionist, but once she gave me a nod, I assumed he wasn't any trouble.

“Very well.”

“Thank you so much. Shall we say until tomorrow night?”

“Yes, that sounds good.”

The competition was to be held in the morning three days from now, so that should be plenty of time.

“Judging by the contents, I'd imagine I should patrol around the guild, the training grounds, and perhaps the shopping district and labyrinth gates to make the announcement. Madam, might I ask for a copy of that flyer? And I'd like to borrow a board until tomorrow, too.”

The man briskly made arrangements for the announcement, said, “That'll be

two silver coins, please,” and looked at me expectantly.

“Great, thanks.”

“Ooh, not even an attempt at haggling? You understand the value of a minstrel, young master.”

I handed him the coins, and he smiled roguishly at me.

If I were a woman, I could see myself falling for him easily.

“Leave the rest to us. No doubt we shall fill your competition roster to the brim with scores of people.”

No, thirty or so would be more than enough.

The receptionist woman and I looked on as the minstrel headed exultantly toward the door with board in hand.

“Oh, that’s right,” she said suddenly. “I found out the name of the child you asked about.”

“The dogfolk child with the purple fur?”

“Yes, I’m told his name is Crow, but...”

She hesitated, looking unsure whether to tell me the rest.

While I waited, I searched the map for the name Crow, but I didn’t get any results.

For some reason, he was nowhere to be found not only in Labyrinth City or the Celivera Labyrinth but even anywhere in the desert or the surrounding territories.

As I puzzled over this, the woman went on.

“...I’m afraid he’s disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“Yes, I saw him by the west gate and asked his name, but...”

The child had murmured “Crow” without even looking at the woman, then vanished into thin air like a mirage.

“Perhaps he was some kind of ghost.”

That would explain why he didn't show up on my map.

I thanked the receptionist and left the west guild hall.

After that, I brought Lulu along to do a few errands related to hosting the tournament, then went back to meet up with our hardworking friends in the labyrinth just as the sun was starting to set.



"Satou."

A bored-looking Mia spotted us as soon as we came to rejoin the group and clung to me immediately.

"Welcome back! Everything's going great."

Arisa didn't look too busy, either.

Behind them, Pochi and Liza had weakened a rock-head bee for Iruna and Jena of the Lovely Wings to finish off.

Mr. Kajiro and Miss Ayaume were with Nana, hunting mantises farther down the passage.

"Neeext?"

Tama came back with three horn hoppers in tow.

"S-seriously?"

"Wait, we haven't beaten this one yet!"

"Hurry uuup?"

Tama seemed unmoved by the duo's plight.

I'd loaned both of them mithril-alloy longswords handmade by yours truly, so they could cut through even the toughest of monsters regardless of their abilities.

"Pochi, you and Tama go wear down the next monsters."

"Yes, sir."

Pochi pulled out her sword, which was pinning down the rock-head bee's wing, and went with Tama to cut off the horn hoppers' horns and stingers.

“Here comes the next helping!”

Just as Iruna and Jena finally brought down the rock-head bee, two near-death horn hoppers tumbled in front of them.

Liza restrained the monsters for the two to defeat them.

The plan was to continue with this method until the Lovely Wings reached level 20 or so, then carry on improving their prowess by fighting monsters normally.

“How many times have you gotten level-up sickness so far?”

“Only twice. The third one will probably be coming on soon, so maybe we’ll call it quits after that.”

The two had been level 9 this morning, but now they were already level 17.

I wanted them to get to level 25 or so before they led hands-on field training for the explorers’ school.

The amount of EXP for each level up to 30 wasn’t too high—it should be easy enough.

“Well, now I’m painfully aware of how average I am.”

“Same here.”

Iruna and Jena both looked exhausted.

They’d finished their leveling up for the day, and now we were eating dinner at the campsite Lulu and I had prepared.

From the looks of them, the intensive training with my party had been a bit of culture shock.

I thought we’d kept things relatively tame today, but even that must’ve been too fast-paced.

“Fear not, for I feel the same way.”

“Me too.”

Kajiro and Ayaume nodded in tired agreement.

“I’ll heat up some water later so you can go to bed feeling refreshed.”

It would probably be unwise to produce a bath from Storage or make one with my or Arisa's magic.

"A bath in the labyrinth?"

Mr. Kajiro looked surprised, so Miss Ayaume spoke for them.

"We appreciate it, but if we're going to be staying for three days, we should preserve our water and kindling."

"R-right. Hot food is more than enough."

"Yeah, this is delicious."

Iruna and Jena seemed to feel the same way.

I guess normally people can't bring a huge amount of water and kindling deep into the labyrinth.

"But baths feel really good, sir."

"It soothes the soooul?"

Not quite understanding, Pochi and Tama extolled the virtues of bathing.

"Pochi, Tama. You never know what might happen in the labyrinth. Carelessly taking off your equipment could mean death. Baths are a luxury to look forward to when one returns to the surface."

Tama and Pochi looked even more confused by Kajiro's words.

After all, we normally bathed every night in our labyrinth vacation home during our expeditions.

"Don't worry—we have Mia's magic to alert us of any danger. And the hot water is prepared with a magic tool, so there's no need to be afraid of wasting it."

With that, I produced a large cask of water from my Garage Bag and heated it up.

I'd have to heat it back up later, but that demonstration was enough to satisfy the hesitant bathers.

Incidentally, some monsters did actually approach while the women were

bathing, but Kajiro and I fended them off.

“Sir Knight, I have been thinking that I should like to help with your floormaster expedition.”

Kajiro broached the subject as he was retrieving the core from one of the monsters.

I wasn't sure about Miss Ayaume, but at level 40, Mr. Kajiro should be safe to join in our battle.

Knowing his deep sense of fealty, I wasn't worried about him telling anyone if he saw how strong my group really was.

“Sir Kajiro—”

“I understand. After watching the Lovely Wings train today and accompanying Lady Nana to fight mantises, my inadequacy is painfully clear.”

I was about to invite him along, but he interrupted me.

“I know that I cannot keep up with your party and you. Perhaps it would be different were I still in my prime, but in my current state, I would surely only slow you down.”

Kajiro looked despondent.

Feeling like a parasite to our party probably went against his code of honor.

“There's no need to rush. I'm sure you'll be a swordsman on par with the Shiga Eight before long.”

“...Then I shall aim to become strong enough that you will someday ask me to fight by your side.”

With that declaration, the dauntless Kajiro went off to practice his form in a corner of the cavern.

I watched him continue until my group came back from their bath.



“Do you want to be explorerrrrrs?”

““““Yeahhh!!””””

Arisa spoke into a voice-amplifying magic tool, the sound bouncing off Labyrinth City walls near the temporary tent we'd set up right outside the north gate.

Gathered in front of Arisa was a crowd of more than three hundred kids who wanted to be scholarship students at the explorers' school. Apparently, the minstrel I'd hired was particularly gifted.

As far as I could tell, the gender ratio was about 70 percent boys to 30 percent girls; to my surprise, it also was about 60 percent demi-humans to 40 percent humans, despite the latter making up more of the general population.

As far as ages, the overwhelming majority were about middle school-aged, but there were some who ranged from elementary school kids to middle-aged adults.

We'd been targeting kids who were bag carriers or unemployed, but we got a few kids with wooden or bronze explorer badges, too.

And there were some familiar faces in the crowd.

"Hey, mister! We're gonna be scholarship students, just you watch!"

The rabbitfolk boy Usasa and his friends came running up to me.

We had first met them when Zarigon's garnet-badge party, the Hellfire Fangs, had gone to fight an areamaster; they had been tricked by a nasty explorer named Besso and might've died if we hadn't rescued them.

"...Listen up!"

Iruna, who was standing next to Arisa, began shouting an explanation to the kids without even using a magic tool.

Usasa and friends turned to look at her, along with all the other kids.

"Sir Pendragon's explorers' school scholarship student competition is about to begin!"

Iruna seemed pretty fired up, since we were going to be choosing her first students from this group.

She was even wearing armor, although she wouldn't be going into battle.

The Lovely Wings were currently wearing equipment made out of mantis materials. When I'd given it to them to celebrate their reaching level 20, they jumped up and down for joy.

As I later learned, mantis armor was the mark of a true veteran in Labyrinth City.

"Let me make one thing clear, since some of you seem to have the wrong idea! Those who pass will *not* be invited to join Sir Pendragon's expedition to defeat a floormaster. If that's why you're here, just leave now!"

At that, a few explorers slouched away, looking disappointed.

They must've thought that I would scout them for my party if they showed their skills here.

"We'll be choosing eighteen people," Arisa explained. "First, we'll choose the six fastest competitors. If you're fast enough, you can serve the valuable role of a scout, luring monsters for your party to battle. When I give the signal on this flute, start running! The first six to make it all the way around the outer walls of Celivera win."

Then Arisa blew a shrill whistle from the flute, and the kids took off running.

Some of them tripped one another, while plenty of others fell of their own accord. But not a one of them sat in the dirt to cry—they picked themselves right back up and kept running. I was impressed.

For some reason, Pochi and Tama were running, too, probably tempted along by the crowd of kids.

"Master, we'll head out as well."

"Rider mode engaged, I declare."

Liza rode after the kids on horseback, while Nana steered a wagon. I'd asked them to pick up any children who collapsed along the way.

If anyone tried to take a shortcut from the south gate, Skopi and his gang, the Mud Scorpions, would catch them.

While we waited, I used the Clairvoyance spell to watch the marathon.

Two kids fainted from anemia, and a few boys fell to exhaustion, but they were scooped into Nana's wagon right away.

"Looks like they're coming back."

Lulu waved from where she was observing through the scope of her rifle.

"I win, sir!"

Pochi came in first by a wide margin. Tama had been hot on her heels, but evidently Pochi was better at distance running.

"Mrrr, I'll get you next tiime?"

"Pochi accepts all challengers, sir!"

Getting worked up for a change, Tama demanded an eventual rematch.

A little while after they'd finished, the first few of the competitors returned.

"Dammit, we lost to dog-and catfolk! How will we face other rabbitfolk now?"

"I can't believe I lost to someone besides you, Usasa."

The first two racers stared at Pochi and Tama, looking frustrated.

It was Usasa, the boy who'd approached me before the race, and his friend, the rabbitfolk girl Rabibi.

"You wiiin! These two aren't in the running, so you get first and second place."

Arisa handed the first-and second-place medals to Usasa and Rabibi.

It was a considerable amount of time before anyone else finished.

After a while, third place went to a dogfolk child, and fourth through sixth went to human boys.

"Once you cross the finish line, take a break."

"Make sure you drink lots of water, since you just sweat a lot of it out."

Jena and Iruna called to the kids as they reached the goal.

We took a short break period before the second test, during which we provided the kids with water and baked sweets to stock up on calories.

I didn't want any of them to get dizzy from hunger while running around.

Ten kids dropped out during the first test. I had them set up next to our temporary headquarters, where Lulu was teaching them how to do strength training and calisthenics.

"Next is a test of endurance. The first six to complete five laps around the Celivera walls will be accepted. Anyone who completes at least two laps will be rewarded with lunch. Good luck!"

""""Woou!"""

The kids cheered even more enthusiastically for Arisa's second announcement.

I had planned on giving all the participants lunch regardless, but this would probably be a good motivator, so I kept my mouth shut.

However, aside from the leading group of runners, many of the kids who seemed unlikely to win stopped after two laps.

"The one leading the pack is a girl."

"Huh. She's a very evenly paced runner."

A girl with a relatively dark complexion took first place by a narrow margin, followed by two more young girls who seemed to be from the same area. The remaining three were beastfolk who seemed to excel at distance running.

The kids who lost looked disappointed, but not so much that it deterred their excitement for lunch.

In addition to Miss Miteruna and the rest of our maid staff, I'd hired fifteen or so carrier kids who had experience with cooking. Plain and honest-looking, they ranged from ages fourteen to eighteen.

I was planning to have Miss Miteruna train them so I could employ them long-term for the orphanage kitchen or our soup kitchen staff.

"Meat!"

"More skewers than I've ever seen!"

"I'm gonna win the next round for sure."

“Me too!”

The slightly sweet sauce on the meat skewers seemed to be very popular with the children, who laid waste to them in no time flat.

A lot of kids really seemed to love meat.

“Yummy!”

“This meat’s giving me a wunnup, sir.”

Was Pochi trying to say *1UP*?

Unfortunately, meat skewers didn’t give you any extra lives, as far as I knew.

After the lunch break, we chose the final six contestants.

“Now, this is the last test. Please hold the branches we handed out like you would a sword. Yes, elbows straight, just like that. Now, whoever can hold that pose the longest without lowering their arms will win.”

A chorus of groans arose from the kids.

Some complained that it wasn’t a martial-arts competition, but I had no intention of changing the tests, so I ignored them.

“Now, let’s begin. If you’ve got a problem with it, feel free to leave.”

At Iruna’s sharp words, even the kids who had complained reluctantly began the test.

The goal for the final six was to choose kids with guts and perseverance. There was no point in taking students if they couldn’t handle the necessary training before entering the labyrinth.

Most of the group dropped out within an hour, but the remaining eight lasted much longer, until it finally ended when the last person gave in three hours later.

“Thank you for coming today, everyone! We’ll hold this competition again next month, so even if you didn’t get in this time, don’t give up!”

Once Arisa brought things to a close, the kids who hadn’t qualified shuffled back toward the west gate.

We'd handed out three baked treats to each child as a participation prize. Hopefully, this would tempt kids who didn't enter this time to join the next round.

"All competition winners, over here, please."

Iruna gathered the winning kids: twelve boys and six girls.

"All right, let me explain some things. If you miss anything, you can ask us or the other kids later. Just make sure you fully understand everything, all right?"

With that warning, Iruna and Jena explained the plan to the prospective students.

The pair was going to train the students in the basics aboveground for ten days, then take them into the labyrinth six at a time for three rounds of five days, a total of fifteen days each, until they reached level 7 or so.

"The school will lend you equipment, armor, and so on for your training. Remember, they're on loan, so be careful with them."

The children listened obediently.

I was planning to make ant armor for the students, but Arisa strongly objected.

She said that since they were going to be ordinary explorers after the training, not staying under my wing as vassals, it would be better not to give them overpowered equipment.

Iruna and Jena were against it, too: Their reason was that if they got armor strong enough to withstand a hit from monsters, then they might become careless about dodging attacks. Besides, if they didn't get hurt, they might not learn how to treat wounds, the importance of various tools, and other such things.

I consulted with the Lovely Wings about what I should give the kids instead, and they recommended the bone armor that they themselves used to wear.

This consisted of grass woven together into clothes like a jacket and pants, with goblin bones affixed to various places.

The standard progression for Labyrinth City explorers, they said, was to start

with bone or grass armor, then proceed to ant armor, then beetle armor.

For weapons, they wanted to start the kids with clubs made from goblin femurs, then move on to ant-claw short swords from the second round onward. Those who were going to train as tanks would be given a leather shield.

Iruna and Jena had bought a large amount of this equipment made by apprentices in the artisan district at a cheap price. I'd made a few modifications to the weaker parts, so it should be enough to protect them from major injury against low-level enemies.

"Because you'll be staying at the school dormitories during training, there won't be any charge for lodging. We've prepared bedding for you, but please bring your own pajamas."

Some of the kids looked confused: Apparently, they didn't know what pajamas were.

"You'll be fed three meals a day, with second helpings if you want them. There'll be meat at least once a day."

""""Whooooa!""""

The key words *second helpings* and *meat* elicited cheers from the children.

I figured good food would give them comfort after the intense training, and more importantly, they needed lots of calories and protein to grow up strong, so Lulu and I had devised a healthy yet cost-effective menu.

After the explanation, the staff started packing up the tent, and we took the enthusiastic kids to the explorers' school.

Once we finished training these scholarship kids and gained some teaching know-how, I figured we could open up the explorers' school for tuition students, too.

In order to train the teachers, though, we would probably continue with scholarship kids only until the end of the year.

Once the school was properly underway, I planned to head out to level up my own kids.

I'd already helped prepare the curriculum for the explorers' school up until

the hands-on field training, and Mr. Kajiro, Miss Miteruna, and several others had agreed to help, so I could probably leave things in the hands of Iruna and Jena.

Just to be safe, when I had time during battle and such, I could always check in with Clairvoyance to make sure things were running smoothly.

To the Labyrinth's Middle Stratum

Satou here. Apparently, the “power creep” phenomenon that’s common in battle manga series exists in a parallel world, too. I’m glad my group is getting stronger, but I can’t help feeling a little bad when an enemy that once would’ve been a serious challenge to them gets beaten so easily.

“Spellblade Shot, sir!”

Facing off against an areamaster called a “king poison moth,” Pochi’s Magic Sword glittered red with “Spellblade.”

Poof.

Just like that, the red light disappeared.

“Pochi, your release timing isn’t quite right. You have to store up energy like *SWISH* and then release it like *BOOM*.”

Dodging a magical attack from the king poison moth, Liza demonstrated a Spellblade Shot.

Liza’s had also been unstable when she first learned how to do it, but lately her range, power, and accuracy had all significantly improved.

That being said, I thought her explanation was a little too vague for Pochi to follow.

Mwooooothhhw.

The Spellblade Shot hit the areamaster squarely on the forehead, and it unleashed a high-pitched shriek.

I wonder where its vocal cords are.

“Shurikeeen?”

Tama tossed a throwing star imbued with “Spellblade” at the giant moth.

It pierced right through the monster's defensive barrier and embedded itself in one of the moth's six compound eyes.

"First go *SWISH*, then...*BOOM*, sir!"

Pochi's short sword unleashed a little Spellblade Shot.

...I guess Liza's explanation actually had gotten through to her.

The shot evaporated before it reached the king poison moth, but Pochi still hopped up and down with glee. I would have to give her plenty of head pats later.

"Dimension Slasher!"

Arisa launched a Space Magic spell that was the advanced form of Dimension Cutter, slicing off one of the moth's wings.

As soon as it hit the ground, it was no longer a threat, and the vanguard's teamwork quickly dispatched it.

"Hmm. Flying types are squishy, but it still takes time to beat them because the vanguard's short-range attacks can't reach."

"Yes, I suppose they put a significant load on the rear guard."

Taking a break, Arisa and Liza exchanged opinions.

"Satou."

Mia tugged on my sleeve.

I thought she was going to say that she'd leveled up, but it appeared to be something else.

"What's the matter?"

"Miasma's weird."

I activated my "Miasma Vision" and looked around.

The thick miasma that surrounded the king poison moth's corpse was being sucked away into the labyrinth's floors and vent holes at an unnatural speed.

Mia must have noticed because she could see spirits with her Spirit Vision, and they always avoided miasma.

I used Clairvoyance to follow where the miasma was going, and I found it was heading to a spawnhole.

It was almost like the labyrinth was trying to recover the miasma before it evaporated.

“Maybe we’ve been hunting too many labyrinth monsters lately.”

We were mowing down so many enemies that we’d wiped out two-thirds of the monster population in the Upper Stratum, but aside from the areas populated by lots of explorers, monsters seemed to be respawning much more slowly than usual.

There seemed to be fewer monsters coming and going through spawnholes, too.

In particular, the areamasters and their spawn didn’t seem to be coming back at all.

I’d planned on having my group hunt in the remaining ten sections, but maybe we should move on to the Middle Stratum instead.

“Yeah, I guess I wouldn’t blame the DM for getting mad.”

Arisa shrugged, as if it was someone else’s problem.

The DM? Does she mean the dungeonmaster?

If that meant swarms of monsters would start coming after us, at least we wouldn’t have to keep finding new hunting grounds.

While I contemplated this, Pochi came running over, still celebrating her Spellblade Shot.

“Master! I did it, sir!”

“Good job, Pochi.”

I patted Pochi’s head as she puffed up proudly, causing her tail to wag so quickly, it looked like it might pop right off.

“Hee-hee, I can do it if I put my mind to it, sir.”

It was cute to see her so proud of herself.

“I’m gonna learn Spellblade Shot, toooo!”

Tama looked a little frustrated that Pochi had gotten ahead of her.

“No need to rush. You’ll figure it out at your own pace.”

I patted Tama’s head with my free hand.

“Tama, you have to store it up like *SWISH*, then release it like *BOOM*.”

“Like thiiiis?”

“No, sir. *SWISH*, then *BOOM*, sir.”

“Mew...”

Following Liza’s and Pochi’s questionable advice, Tama attempted the Spellblade Shot a few times.

Before long, she was out of magic power.

“No more magiic?”

“Want one of these?”

“Aye-aye!”

I offered one of my new magic-recovery potions to Tama, who drank it immediately.

“Yummy!”

She seemed to approve of the new beef-jerky flavor.

Tama went on to practice Spellblade Shots through several more rounds of magic recovery. From the second time onward, I used my Mana Transfer spell to refill her magic.

Then, at last...

“*SWISH*, then *BOOM*?”

A little Spellblade Shot sprang out of Tama’s Magic Sword.

For some reason, it had a curved trajectory.

“I did iiit?”

“Well done, Tama.”

“Now we match, sir.”

“Aye!”

Tama beamed happily as Liza nodded and Pochi smiled.

“Is it just me, or did that Spellblade Shot curve?”

“It doesn’t seem like you can curve it by spinning it when you launch it, like you would with a ball.”

Tama’s Spellblade Shot hadn’t been spinning or anything.

“Can you do Spellblade Shot, too, master?”

“More or less.”

I nodded at Arisa.

While Tama was practicing, I’d experimented and found that I could produce a Spellblade Shot by putting “Spellblade” on the tip of my fingernail.

It took a little time to master, since the magic manipulation was different from shooting fireballs out of a fire-attribute Magic Sword like I had before.

Spellblade Shots required around the same amount of magic as an intermediate attack spell, yet they were only about half as powerful. I doubted I’d be using them much.

Still, it could come in handy at some point, so I put some points into my new “Spellblade Shot” skill and activated it just in case.

“Master, it is treasure-hunting time, I report.”

After our break, Nana seemed excited to look for treasure chests.

Lulu giggled. “I hope we find something pretty or rare.”

The two must have been anxiously awaiting our traditional treasure hunt after clearing out a section.

Everyone but Tama was exhausted from having beaten down monsters at the camp all day, so a chance to freely explore the fantastical sights of the labyrinth was probably a welcome respite.

We walked through a mysterious cavern full of insect scales, oohing and

aahing at the crystalline forest of frozen-looking trees.

The piles of scales on the floor could be used as is for paralysis potions or processed into an anesthetic, but I decided not to pick them up, since they could also be used for nasty poisons.

“So, master, how’s the explorers’ school going?”

“Looks like there’ve been a few minor snags, but no major issues at the moment.”

I was checking in on the school periodically with Clairvoyance, but the only problems thus far seemed to be a few kids who had overworked themselves and collapsed and one who had failed at a parry in training and broken a bone.

“That’s good to hear.”

“Master, I have located a treasure chest, I report.”

“Ooh, number one already? Let’s go, master.”

Arisa’s eyes lit up after hearing Nana’s announcement, and she grabbed my hand and dragged me over to catch up with the others.

In the end, we didn’t find anything particularly of note in the treasure chests, but the kids were pleased with finds like some butterfly-like masks and a risqué dress made of a lamé-like fabric.

“No magic equipment at all this time, huh?”

“That’s perfectly normal.”

Cursed equipment turned up a solid 30 percent of the time, but the odds of finding mithril swords, Magic Swords, or the like were less than 10 percent.

Magic Shields were a bit more common, but Magic Armor was so rare that we’d only ever found the like twice.

While the Magic Swords ranged in power from a normal iron sword to one of my first-generation forged Magic Swords, they never had useful features beyond an attribute, so I just stuck them in Storage like trophies or collector’s items.

If anything, coming upon spell books or amusing finds like these ones was the

bigger win, in my opinion.



“Okay, let’s take a lunch break for a while.”

Once we finished treasure hunting, we returned to our labyrinth vacation home for lunch, which was fried prawns at Nana’s request.

I suspected it was because the king poison moth’s abdomen resembled a prawn, but that would probably ruin everyone’s appetite, and I kept my mouth shut about that.

“Master, come on—take a break with us.”

“I’m all right. I got plenty of rest while you were fighting.”

Despite protests from Arisa and the others, I stood up to leave.

“I was planning to look for a hunting area in the Middle Stratum of the labyrinth.”

“Nooo.”

Mia shook her head.

“Exactly! It’s no fun to teleport down there by yourself. Wouldn’t you rather overcome the obstacles and work our way through it together?”

The younger kids all nodded enthusiastically, and the older girls gave quiet nods of agreement, too.

I guess it would feel like more of an adventure if we do it together.

“I suppose you have a point. After our break, we’ll jump to the closest teleport point to the passage to the Middle Stratum; then we can all explore together from there.”

“Now, that’s more like it!”

“Tallyhooooo?”

“Hooray, sir.”

When I suggested this change of plans, the kids jumped up and down for joy.

Since they seemed so excited, I decided to look for a route that we could walk

normally, even if it meant taking a few detours.

Listening contentedly to the kids trading guesses about what the Middle Stratum might be like, I opened my map and traced out a path to the Middle Stratum, using Clairvoyance and Clairaudience to make sure there weren't any problems.

It would take nearly ten times longer than if I went with "Skysrunning," Magic Hand, and the like, but it was fun to take the scenic route once in a while.

"Where are we now?"

"About half a mile away from the western edge of the Celivera Labyrinth, I'd say? If we were aboveground, I think we'd be right around where we made that stone shrine after playing in the desert the other day."

It took around two hours from the closest teleport point until we reached the large cavern containing the pit that went down to the Middle Stratum.

This area was farther west than the basin containing Labyrinth City Celivera and even the mountains beyond it. Some sand seemed to have leaked in through the vent holes: Part of the room was covered in it, trickling slowly into the pit.

"F-for real?"

"For real."

Arisa and the others looked incredibly surprised.

They were probably realizing just how ridiculously enormous the Celivera Labyrinth was.

"Abyyyss!"

"I can't see a thing down there, sir."

"Don't get too close."

Pochi and Tama stared into the pit, their tails standing on end.

"Aye-aye."

"Yes, sir."

Still gazing down into the dark, they scooted back toward me.

“This part doesn’t have an elevator like the other side, I see.”

“That was probably built by an old explorers’ guild or even a previous kingdom, don’t you think?”

Arisa was using Clairvoyance to examine the far-off other side of the dark pit.

“Master, it looks like we can get down that way.”

“There are no stairs, I declare.”

“Mm. Downhill.”

Nana and Mia looked in the direction Lulu was pointing.

There was a spiral-shaped slope winding around the edge of the pit with a large, round dent in the middle of the path.

“I dunno...I do *not* like the look of that dent.”

Arisa’s face twisted as she looked at the slope.

She was probably thinking about that famous scene from an American adventure movie—the one where a giant boulder rolls down after the hero.

I looked around, then up.

“...Arisa.”

I used the Practical Magic spell Mana Light to illuminate the ceiling and pointed upward.

“Geh!”

“Geeeh?”

“Geh-geh-geh, sir.”

“A pill bug?”

Ten or so giant rolled-up pill bugs were hanging from the ceiling by thin threads like bagworms.

Judging by their positions, they would probably drop down onto the dent one after another.

Experimentally, I tried cutting one of the threads with Dimension Cutter, and the giant pill bug dropped down onto the path, taking up the entire width.

It rolled down slowly at first but soon accelerated to the speed of a car.

“Should we drop them all?”

“I wouldn’t want the path to break down, so I’ll get rid of the rest normally.”

I selected Remote Arrow from the magic menu and dispatched each of the pill bugs on the ceiling.

Of course, I made sure to catch them with Magic Hand as they fell and put them in Storage to avoid damaging our path downward.

Liza led the way, carrying a torch I’d lit for dramatic effect. I also used my original Light Magic spell Pixie Light to create faint bug-like glowing spheres that lit up the path and surrounding area like footlights. Overall, it looked pretty good.

“Tunnells?”

“Lots, sir.”

“Mrrr?”

As we proceeded down into the pit, we started to notice tunnels irregularly dotting the walls.

“Looks like the kind of place where a bear would hibernate or something.”

“I think there are monsters in some of them.”

According to my map information, most of the tunnels were dead ends, but a few connected to spawnhole passages.

Most likely, the spawnholes would open up and send monsters chasing after us from behind.

I could easily imagine grisly outcomes like explorers checking out the tunnel, only to get attacked from behind just when they thought the coast was clear or setting up camp in one and getting ambushed in the dead of night.

“Lizaaard?”

“This is the perfect time for a Spellblade Shot, sir!”

Pochi excitedly whipped out her sword and pointed it at the “lizard” Tama had spotted. It was a monster called a “maze gecko.”

“Take this, sir!” she shouted, and a Spellblade Shot released from the sword’s tip and neatly defeated the gecko.

It hadn’t been long since she’d learned to use it, but her speed was already improving. Maybe Pochi actually had a knack for Spellblade Shots.

I put the monster’s remains in Storage, and we continued down the slope.

There was quite a variety of interesting encounters: We were occasionally attacked by maze geckos or maze bats, patches of glowing moss on the wall, and even a wight that rose out of the skeletal remains of an explorer.

“I’m surprised other explorers made it down this far.”

I put the explorer’s remains into Storage, using the AR display to inspect the documents he’d been carrying.

They were written in the language of the Flue Empire.

“Looks like this was an explorer from the era of the Flue Empire.”

The person had lived some six to seven hundred years ago and appeared to have been a researcher who was averse to combat; he’d made use of a lesser-known skill called “Obscure” to sneak around monsters and make it this far.

In the end, he appeared to have succumbed to a fever.

“I wonder what he came down here to do?”

“It says in his journal: ‘I shall meet the ancient king in all his boundless wisdom, acquire life that never ends, and continue my research for eternity.’”

According to his accounts, he seemed to have believed that this so-called ancient king lived in the Lower Stratum of the labyrinth.

“Ooh. Eternal life, huh? Would you want that, master?”

“Maybe I did when I was a kid, but now I don’t think humans could really handle it.”

In the back of my mind, I remembered the unwavering eyes of the ancient elf elders.

I was certainly tempted by the thought of living alongside Miss Aaze, a high elf who would live for millions of years, but I didn't think the human mind was meant to last that long.

Even if you could live longer with some kind of rejuvenating potion, I thought a thousand years or so would be more than enough.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

With that simple conclusion from Arisa, we continued down the slope.

Around the halfway point, there was an area where white steam was rising from the center of the path.

"It's surrounded by slimy moss, I report."

"It does not appear to be an acid trap."

Nana and Liza produced poles from their Fairy Packs to prod at the puddle that was creating the steam.

For some reason, it smelled faintly of rotten eggs.

"Hey, master..."

Arisa seemed to have noticed the sulfur smell, too.

"Maybe there's a hot springs somewhere in the labyrinth," I commented.

"Really?! If there is, we gotta build our second vacation house next to it!" Arisa latched on to the idea immediately. "And it'll be mixed-gender bathing, of course!"

"No sexual harassment, please."

Arisa started breathing heavily and drooling, so I flicked her forehead.

"Gaaaah!"

Ignoring her overreaction, I used Magic Hand to carry everyone over the somewhat large pool of water.

The beastfolk girls were able to jump to the other side, but Tama and Pochi

insisted on coming back so that I could carry them across anyway.

“Ouchie. I swear, your forehead flicks must use some secret skill or—”

Arisa stopped grumbling abruptly, staring up at the ceiling.

“Master, look at that!” She pointed upward in surprise.

“Sparklyyy!”

“Treasure, sir?”

A golden streak was visible in an indent along the side wall.

“We’ve struck gold! Tama, Pochi, would one of you be able to climb up there?”

“Easy, sir.”

Pochi rolled up her sleeves and got ready to climb the wall, but Tama cried out to stop her. “Nooo!”

“Why not, sir?”

“Lots of traaaps?”

The group looked toward me for confirmation, and I nodded.

“Poison spray, retractable spikes, and even a trap that makes the wall collapse.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

“And that’s not even gold—it’s iron pyrite.”

“Fool’s gold, huh? Awww, man.”

When I reported the information from my AR, Arisa slumped in disappointment.

If I remembered right, this metal was a compound of iron and sulphite, but it wasn’t very useful due to being hard to extract or something.

“Darn it all! Now we *have* to find that hot springs, no matter what!”

“Woooo!”

“Sir!”

Newly fired up, Arisa led the way down the slope, and we followed her until we reached the labyrinth's Middle Stratum.

Unlike the pit near the labyrinth entrance, this one didn't go down all the way to the Lower Stratum.



"Fwah-ha-ha, victory is mine!"

Arisa cackled atop a large boulder.

In front of her was a roiling cloud of white steam.

The hot springs were physically quite close to the pit, but the route to them went through no less than seven different areas.

Fighting our way through monsters to get there would've taken too long, so I feigned a coincidental accident during one of our battles to break down a wall connecting to a spawnhole and create a shortcut.

"Well, we should probably wipe out the monsters here."

There were a few hot springs in this area, but this was the only place where a spawnhole couldn't form.

"What, we're going to drive out the native population?"

"Hmm? What could be unnatural about defeating monsters?"

Liza looked incredulously at Arisa, who was watching the small thunder apes soaking in the hot springs.

"Well, they might be friendly!"

"I don't think so."

I created illusions of Arisa and the girls and sent them to walk up to the monkeys.

Before the illusions could open their mouths, the thunder apes destroyed them all with lightning, bared their teeth, and charged toward us.

"The path of bloodshed, sir."

"Violeeence!"

My party prepared for battle.

Pochi's unusual line was probably a quote that Arisa had taught her from some anime or something.

I jumped between the girls and the small thunder apes with "Warp," grabbed the monsters and other dangerous creatures inside the hot springs with Magic Hand, and chucked them across the room. They were all pretty weak—my companions could probably take them down in no time.

I used "Skylarking" to survey the terrain from above and started drawing up blueprints to build our hot-springs vacation home.

"Master, we're done with the monsters here, so we'll go clear out some of the nearby rooms. Anything we should be worried about?"

The ordinary monsters in the Middle Stratum were a bit higher level than those in the Upper Stratum, but the areamasters and their kin were virtually the same.

In fact, the lower-level monsters had the nastiest tricks. Many of them had dangerous abilities like Poison, Paralysis, Curses, Plague, Evil Eyes, Magic Absorption, Magic Resistance, Physical Resistance, and so on.

And the majority of them seemed to use magic, or at least some kind of magical effect.

So although the levels weren't too far apart, the Middle Stratum monsters were definitely more challenging.

"Watch out for the mad apes that produce poison liquid and the mana-eater apes that absorb magic. A lot of the other monsters use magic, too, so don't let your guard down."

"You got it, Chief."

I watched them head out, then sorted the monster corpses by species and put them into Storage.

Then I activated Clairvoyance and Clairaudience so I could monitor the girls' battles with "Parallel Thoughts" and got back to work on my blueprints.



“...Absolutely splendid.”

Standing on a craggy area looking down on the completed hot springs, the bath-loving Liza clenched her fist emotionally.

It was worth all the hard work if it made them this happy.

While I was working on the hot springs, I also acquired titles like Hot Springs Engineer and Hot Springs Admiral.

“As usual, your productivity is so overpowered, it’s cheating.”

“How rude.”

I certainly wouldn’t have finished so fast if it weren’t for helpful abilities like magic and Storage, but that didn’t make me all-powerful.

I still hadn’t actually started the vacation house itself yet, just built the tubs, dressing rooms, restrooms, and so on.

The tubs were more or less normal, too, without any fancy features like jets or saunas.

Eventually, I wanted to try adding those kinds of features, along with a midair tube bath, a flowing bath, and other novel ideas.

“This is amazing, though. There are so many!”

“Mm. Magical.”

Lulu and Mia gazed wide-eyed at the many open-air baths I’d made.

I’d originally added more bath areas so I could fine-tune the temperature in each one, but I started getting into it in the process and wound up adding a Roman-style bathhouse, a foot-soaking fountain, and such.

“There’s no Japanese cypress tub?”

“I figured I’d make that an indoor bath in the house.”

Cypress sounded nice, but I also wanted to try making a tub with the pleasant-smelling Mountain-Tree wood.

“May we enter now? I inquire.”

Nana was already pulling off her clothes without waiting for a response.

Huh. She's grown quite a bit.

"Eek! Miss Nana, cover yourself!"

"Mrrr. Forbidden."

Lulu and Mia covered Nana with a large cloth.

"Mashterrr—"

Arisa tried to cop a feel in the process of covering my eyes, but I caught her in midair as I directed the others over to the changing room.

I also let them know that the baths were hotter the higher upstream you went and suggested that they go to the third level or lower. The top level was hot enough to possibly burn you, so I'd put a lid over that one.

"Waaah, so mean..."

"You must've worked up a sweat fighting those monsters, right? Go take a bath already."

Ignoring Arisa's teary look, I turned her around and sent her to the changing room with the rest of the group.

Liza was so excited that she was practically skipping, which was quite a rare sight. Her tail was whipping back and forth eagerly, too.

"Master, come with us."

"I'm all right, thanks. I bathed plenty while I was setting things up."

Besides, knowing Arisa, she'd probably demand that I strip on the grounds that it's uncouth to wear clothes in an open-air bath.

"Awww, man."

Arisa looked dejected, but then a grin crept over her face again.

"Oh, right, master. What should I do with the monsters we defeated? If I keep them in my Garage Bag, they'll rot eventually, you know?"

"Good point. Let's transfer them before they get gross, then."

I thought she must've come up with some evil plot, but when we went to the corner of the room, she produced the mountain of monster corpses as

promised.

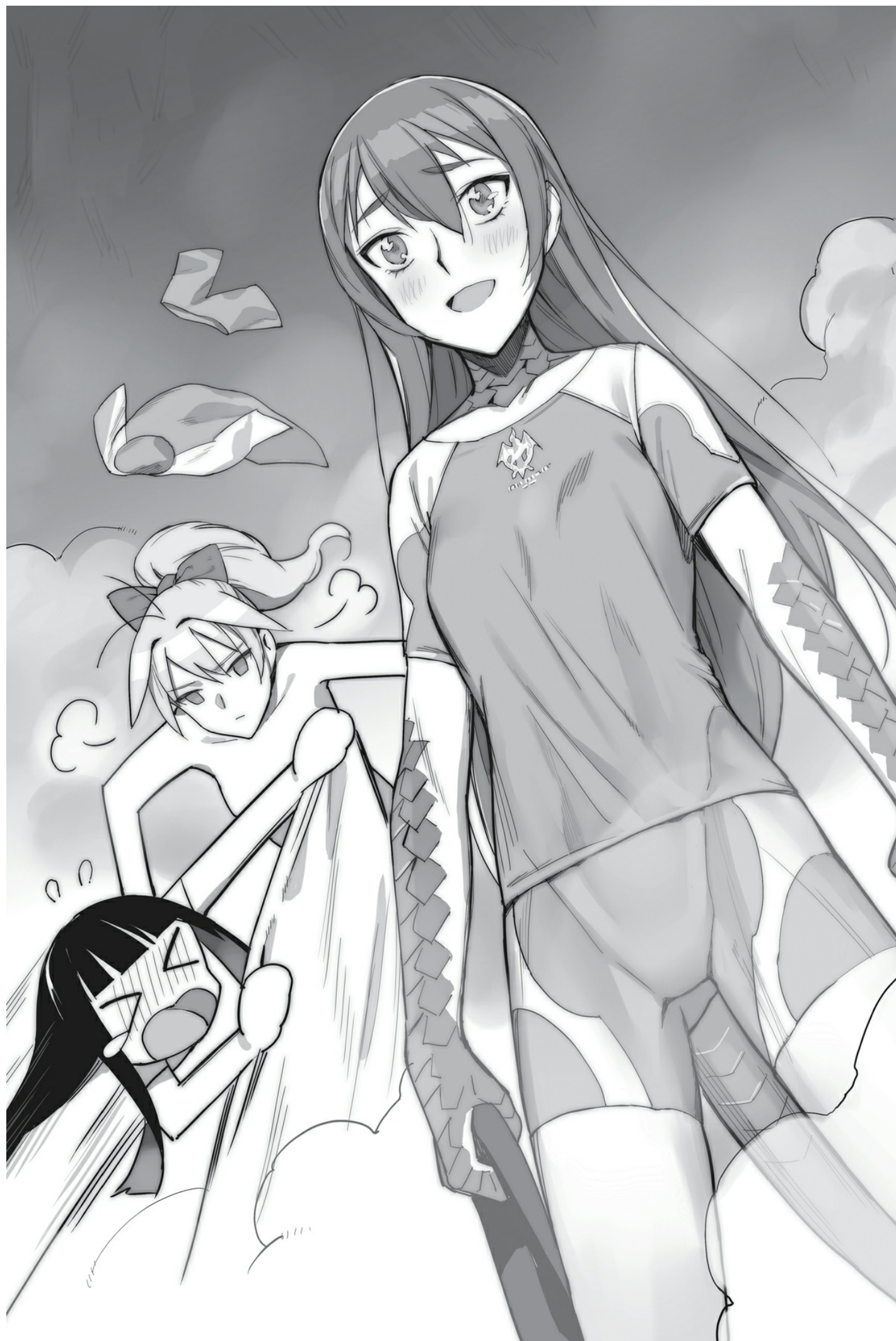
When she opened her Garage Bag, a huge amount of blood came gushing out, but I dodged it right away with “Warp,” so I didn’t get a drop on me.

Arisa looked disappointed, but I was sure that was only my imagination.

“Looks like you didn’t completely exterminate all the monsters in the area, then?”

“Yeah, we left the extra-weak ones and the small monkeys alone. Oh, and I think this might be edible?”

“...A gold persimmon?”



Arisa produced a largish persimmon from her Item Box and handed it to me.

“Yeah, some kind of coconut crabs were growing them.”

She then pulled out a bag from her Item Box containing a cushion-size coconut crab.

It was dead, of course. My AR display indicated it was called a **maze light fruitcrab**; the **light** part probably came from the light stone pebbles on its back.

“They were stuck to the ceiling of a small cavern, shedding light on the persimmon trees.”

So the crabs helped the trees grow, then ate the fruit when it was ripe? What an interesting symbiotic relationship.

“Crabs growing persimmons? Reminds me of the old ‘The Monkey and the Crab’ folktale.”

“Yeah, I had the same thought, so we only killed one crab and took one persimmon. We even used Mia’s magic to paralyze them so we could leave them a rice ball in exchange before we retreated.”

Okay, you probably didn’t have to go that far.

“So is the persimmon edible?”

Arisa seemed more interested in eating the fruit than marveling at its unique ecology.

“It doesn’t seem to be poisonous, but it’s the astringent type. I think all we could do with it is dry it.”

The golden exterior made it look like a rare ingredient, so I searched my documents in Storage for any information on the fruit or the crab, but no results came up.

“Oh? Why don’t we just pickle it in *shochu* to remove the astringency?”

Arisa’s suggestion sounded like a grandmother’s wisdom.

I would have to get her to teach me how later.

“Huh, I’ve never actually heard of th—”

Just then, the sound of a loud splash and screaming came from behind us.

“OMG!”

“Ouchie!”

Tama and Pochi!

I used “Warp” to teleport over to the source of the cries almost instantaneously.

Tama and Pochi were lying there, their lower bodies turned bright red. According to my AR display, they’d sustained burns.

“Here, I’ll heal you.”

I selected the Water Magic spell Water Heal from the magic menu.

Mia was starting a chant, but I thought it best to take care of this as quickly as possible.

“Pochi! Tama!”

Liza came running over with a Fairy Pack in hand.

She must have been planning to heal them with potions.

“Aye.”

“We’re okay now, sir.”

Even with their wounds healed, the pair’s bodies still seemed hot, so I put some ice from Storage next to them.

“Cooooool?”

“Feels good, sir.”

Still naked, Tama and Pochi pressed the ice against themselves.

“What happened?”

“I’m terribly sorry, master. It was entirely my fault.”

“Boiling-hot bath.”

Mia turned and pointed at the hottest tub. The lid had been removed.

Liza had gotten overexciting about all the baths and taken off the lid to get in,

and Tama and Pochi hadn't been able to resist jumping in after her.

Liza's skin was red, too, but she didn't seem to have any burns.

"Don't ever go into that bath again, you two."

"Aye-aye."

"Yes, sir."

Just to be safe, I gave Tama and Pochi a warning.

"Master, we brought cold water."

"We must cool them down immediately, I report."

A disheveled Lulu and the ever-expressionless Nana came over with buckets of cold water.

"Thanks, you two. I already healed them and gave them ice, so they should be fine now."

"Thank goodness."

"Master, your speedy problem-solving is commendable, I praise."

Lulu slumped to the floor in relief, and Nana splashed herself with the water in her bucket instead.

Looking more carefully, I realized that Nana's skin was also bright red.

"Did you get into the boiling-hot bath, too?"

"Yes, master. The tingling sensation was enjoyable, I report."

"Yes, it was a lovely bath," Liza chimed in ecstatically.

Um, isn't that way too hot for anyone to enjoy? I looked at her quizzically.

"One must simply circulate magic through one's body, similar to using 'Spellblade,'" she explained.

I felt like there was probably something wrong with a bath that required the kind of defensive technique that would normally be reserved for fighting monsters.

"Adding in 'Body Strengthening' improves the circulation, I declare."

Nana demonstrated, circulating magic while activating “Body Strengthening.”

It made all her resistances and defense considerably higher, similar to the “Magic Power Armor” skill that Hayato the Hero had taught me. I decided to teach the vanguard how to do it later.

At any rate, now that I understood what had happened...

I produced some towels from Storage and handed them to the girls, who were all standing around chatting in the nude.

“Eek!”

Finally remembering that she was naked, Lulu shrieked and covered her chest.

“All right, I’ll head back now. Enjoy your baths, everyone.”

“Wait!”

As I turned away to leave, Arisa grabbed my arm.

For some reason, she was naked now, too.

“You’ve seen all of us in the nude, so it’s only fair that you also get naked and join us.”

“No, I don’t think so. Unlike you, some of the other girls are embarrassed to be seen naked.”

I scolded the obviously thirsty Arisa.

“Grrr...”

“I’m glad you understand. Okay, I’ll get out of your hair now so you can relax...”

“W-wait a second, please.”

This time, it was Lulu who tugged on my sleeve to stop me.

“U-ummm, errr... P-please join us?”

...Wait, for real?

That was very unlike Lulu.

“That’s the spirit, Lulu! Come on—man up and strip down already!”

“Mm. Join.”

Mia grabbed on to my arm, too.

“Allow me to wash your back for you, master.”

Liza solemnly held up a towel.

She looked like she was about to twist it up and attack me with it.

Nana stepped forward with her towel as well.

“Then I will wash master’s front, I declare.”

No, that’s not going to happen for a lot of reasons.

“Ahhh, that feels nice.”

In the end, I agreed to join the group in the hot springs as long as I could stay clothed.

I didn’t feel right bathing with a bunch of young girls, so I insisted on covering up with bathrobes and towels.

Only Arisa, Mia, and Lulu were in the same tub with me. The other girls were dispersed among their preferred baths.

“There’s crystal gravel on the stone floor of this one, huh?”

“Pretty.”

Arisa scooped up some of the gravel out of the water and held it to the light, while Mia gazed at it happily.

I had made the stone floor and crystal gravel alike with Stone Object.

I’d been extra careful while I made the gravel so nobody would get hurt.

While setting up the floors, I’d also used the map’s 3-D view to keep an eye on any inclines, just like when I made the vacation home before.

“I can’t believe Miss Liza and Nana liked the boiling-hot bath so much.”

The heat-loving pair was back in the extra-hot tub.

They seemed to be really enjoying it; their faces looked incredibly relaxed.

“Masterrr?”

“There’s a pure-white bath over there, sir.”

Tama and Pochi returned from exploring all the open-air baths.

“Isn’t this a sulfur spring?”

“It is. That one’s milk-colored because I added nutrient-rich bathing powder to it. The powder is really good for your skin.”

I know many Japanese people would consider it heresy to add anything to hot springs, but I happened to have a recipe for bathing powder for sulfur springs, so I couldn’t resist trying it out.

““...Good for your skin?””

Arisa and Lulu both froze.

Lulu in particular had moved closer to me with a red face and was staring somewhere in the vicinity of my collarbone, a reaction I hadn’t seen in a while.

“Fine, I’m going in. I can’t resist the allure of beautiful skin.”

“Nnngh... I’ll come, too.”

Arisa took the lead, and a conflicted-looking Lulu reluctantly followed her with a heartbroken expression.

“Pretty skiiin?”

“Puru puru pururin, sir.”

Doing a weird little dance, Tama and Pochi followed Arisa and Lulu.

I wasn’t sure what the joke was supposed to be there, but they seemed to be having fun, so I didn’t press the subject.

“You’re not going with them, Mia?”

“Mm. All mine.”

Mia smirked in a way that didn’t suit her age—or at least her youthful appearance—and leaned her head on my shoulder.

I guess that’s all right every once in a while.

I used the Pixie Light spell to make artificial fireflies dance around near the ceiling as we all enjoyed the hot springs.

“OMG! Boat-wrap sushi, spiny lobster soup, and even *chawanmushi*?!”

“Wild-plant tempura.”

Arisa and Mia seemed very excited about the evening’s dinner offerings.

My concept for the spread was inspired by the type of dinner that would be served at a traditional hot-springs inn, an *onsen ryokan*.

Noticing the lack of meat, Tama and Pochi looked crestfallen, and Liza’s tail drooped despite her efforts to remain calm, so I decided to make them some nice thick steaks later.

“Yes. They’re technically lobsters from Ganika Bay, but...” I trailed off, then revealed my secret dish with a grin. “I made this, too.”

“Finally! In a way, that’s the real main dish!”

“Boiled eggs?” Liza asked.

“Nope! They’re the soul food of the hot springs—*onsen tamago*!”

I think you’re exaggerating a little, Arisa.

“All right, let’s eat.”

I heard stomachs starting to rumble, so I let the feast begin.

Arisa declared, “Thanks for the food!” to get things started.

“Mmmm, silky! I can’t believe I get to eat *onsen tamago* in the middle of a labyrinth!” Arisa exclaimed delightedly.

“Tempura, yummy.”

Mia pushed the bowl of *onsen tamago* off on Arisa, digging into a plate of tempura-fried mushrooms similar to chicken of the woods.

She liked hard-boiled eggs well enough, but apparently not soft-boiled or the slow-cooked softness of *onsen tamago*, eggs cooked in the hot springs.

“It reminds me of soft-boiled eggs, but it’s not quite the same thing.”

“The yolk is certainly similar, but the whites have scarcely solidified, perhaps?”

Lulu and Liza, our two cooking enthusiasts, were analyzing the *onsen tamago*.

Pochi, Tama, and Nana slurped down their eggs, then shifted their sights to the lobster and tempura.

“Lobster’s yumyyy!”

“Sashimi is good, too, sir.”

“The ‘*chawanmushi*’ has cute chick shapes in it, I report.”

Each of them seemed to have their own way of enjoying the dinner.

I decided to dig in to the *onsen tamago*, too.

First, I wanted to try it plain. I didn’t react as dramatically as Arisa, but the whites were uniquely delicious.

Next, I dipped a bite into some special *dashi* stock. Slightly sweet dashi goes very well with *onsen tamago*.

I made enough for each person to have three or so, but now I sort of wished I’d made more.

They’d be delicious on top of a salad, too.

Maybe I could get Mia to try it like that next time.

“Master, eating *onsen tamago* makes me want to have *ajitama* next.”

Arisa was referring to another Japanese egg dish, this one consisting of half-boiled eggs seasoned with sweet soy sauce.

“Shall we have ramen and *ajitama* for lunch tomorrow, then?”

“I want *char-siu* ramen, sir.”

“Garlic ramen.”

Pochi and Mia submitted requests, too. The others didn’t seem to have any objections.

Training in the labyrinth certainly did require a lot of good food, baths, and rest.



“Ouchie, sir.”

In the last stage of a battle, Pochi's Spellblade broke into shards of light, as if it had exploded.

Everyone looked at her immediately, but she yelled, "I'm fine, sir," so they shifted their focus back to the battle.

Because Mia was in the middle of a Spirit Magic chant, she probably wouldn't be able to heal Pochi right away, but I saw Pochi opening her Fairy Pack to drink a potion.

"This is the end, I declare."

Nana shouted at the tiger monster with a tar-like hide using the "Taunt" skill.

"Blast Armor!"

She used a new special move to destroy the protective barrier around the coal tar tiger in one shot.

"Draco Buster!"

Next, Liza's Magic Cricket Spear pierced through the tiger, dazzling with red light.

The liquid around the monster went flying, opening a huge hole in its torso as if it'd been hit with a cannon. Liza's new special attack was pretty brutal.

But Liza didn't seem to be quite satisfied with it; she gazed at her glowing red spear, looking deep in thought.

"Man, so many Middle Stratum monsters have weird gimmicks."

Having cleared out the last monster in the area, Arisa and the others were taking a break.

Monster hunting around the hot-springs area didn't go as quickly as it would in the Upper Stratum, but it was nice to be able to kill as many monsters as we wanted without having to worry about other explorers, so the group was still leveling up at a steady pace.

Everyone but Mia was getting close to level 50.

"Mrrr. Behemoth."

Mia seemed annoyed that the monster had gone down before she could

finish her Spirit Magic chant.

The behemoth is strong, but it requires a lot of magic—even Mia ran out of MP completely after summoning one. Since Mia's main role was healing and support, she really got to use that summon only against areamasters, the last monsters in a given area, and so on.

"Yeah, the chants for summoning pseudo-spirits take a long time, so if we're fighting a small fry, you won't be able to finish before we do."

"Mm. Need shorter chant."

"Yeah, it'd be nice if that were possible..."

Arisa and Mia were chatting about chants.

"Arisa, are you focusing on power-up magic?"

"Yeah, I can do most magic without chants, and I finally maxed out my Space Magic level, so I'm thinking I'll stop leveling up Fire Magic when it reaches level eight and focus on power-enhancing magic or magic-recovering meditation-type spells."

According to Arisa's impressions, the difference in effect between skill levels 8 to 9 and 9 to 10 were huge, even for greater magic spells.

"Master, heal me, sir."

Pochi's hand was bloody.

It appeared that her "Spellblade" had misfired and injured her when she tried to use a special move earlier. She wasn't very good at magic manipulation, so she probably stored up too much power and lost control.

Maybe I could create some kind of toy that would help her practice manipulating magic?

"You didn't use a magic potion?" I asked as I healed her.

"I didn't want to waste it on this, sir."

"I'd rather you use it right away than hold off until after the battle."

"Yes, sir."

I chided her gently.

The whole point of consumable goods was to consume them, after all.

Since we'd defeated all the monsters in the area, we moved on to our traditional treasure hunt.

"It's getting pretty late. Once we finish treasure hunting, we'll put a seal slate in the next area and go back to the labyrinth hot springs."

I'd set up a Japanese-style inn building next to the hot springs so we could spend the night there.

We were using only a small portion of the inn by ourselves, so once we were done leveling up in the Middle Stratum, maybe I could open it up to the Echigoya Company as a recreation facility.

As we searched for treasure chests, I asked everyone their dinner requests.

"Pochi, I think I see something up on that cliff."

"Roger, sir."

Arisa was pointing at a cliff some sixty feet tall.

She'd probably asked Pochi instead of Tama because of the difficult overhang and mossy rocks that made it hard to climb.

Pochi used the same technique as a double jump to make footholds in midair and scamper up the cliff.

This technique was called "Skywalking," a skill she'd recently acquired that was a lesser version of my skill "Skyrunning." In her case, she could make three or four footholds in a row.

"There's a treasure chest, sir!"

Pochi grinned and waved from atop the cliff.

I went up to join her with "Skyrunning" and brought the rest of the group using Magic Hand.

The treasure chest was hidden between the boulders on top of the cliff, in a place that would be easy to miss.

“Good job, Pochi.”

“Hee-hee, sir.”

I patted Pochi’s head, and her tail whipped back and forth.

After a few minutes of this, we opened the treasure chest to see what was inside.

“Katanaaaa?”

“A samurai sword, sir.”

There was a one-handed Japanese-style katana inside the chest.

“A normal Japanese sword?”

“It’s technically a mithril-alloy Magic Sword. The inscription says...‘Van Helsing’? So maybe it’s not from the labyrinth?”

I told Arisa the results of my investigation.

According to my AR, it had been created a fairly long time ago.

The blade itself didn’t have any special magic circuits, only a rune to make it sharper, but the sheath had a fixed magic circuit to ward off the effects of aging.

“Hmm? So a real katana doesn’t go *SHING!* when you hold it?”

“Isn’t that just an old-fashioned sound effect?”

“Aw, man. I like *SHING*, though.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

If I made a Japanese-style sword, maybe I could add a circuit to produce sound effects.

“Arisa, please let me borrow the katana, sir.”

“Sure.”

Arisa put the sword back in its sheath and handed it to Pochi.

“Single-stroke kill, sir.”

Pochi drew the sword dramatically, then sheathed it again.

She had probably learned this in training from Mr. Kajiro the samurai or the elf teachers.

“Tama toooo?”

Pochi passed the blade to Tama, who strapped it to her back and jumped around like a ninja.

“You like ninjas, Tama?”

“Aye!”

Come to think of it, Kajiro’s apprentice and love interest, Miss Ayaume, had taught Tama how to use ninja-style throwing weapons like *shuriken* and *kunai*.

“Tama, ninjas might start out as petty thieves, but they get really cool when they level up!”

“Like hooow?”

“Well, you could learn substitution *jutsu*, or shadow clone *jutsu*, or be na—”

Arisa started to make a reference to some old Western RPG, but I cut her off with a smack to the back of the head.

The last thing Tama needed to know about was naked ninjas. What if she tried to imitate that?

“Besides, real ninjas aren’t truly suited to close combat, are they?”

They were better suited to sneaking behind enemy lines, gathering intel, assassinations, and so on.

“I guess not. But fictional ninjas are way more fun anyway.”

“Like whaaat?”

“I want to know, too, sir.”

Well, no point trying to be historically accurate in a parallel fantasy world, I suppose.

Arisa went on explaining ninjas to the two of them, then suddenly stopped and turned around.

“Oh, hey, master. Did you make that whip sword or the sickle and chain we

talked about before?”

The impractical weapons we’d discussed when Arisa was helping me come up with my Kuro disguise?

Talking about ninja weapons must have reminded her.

“Yes, more or less.”

The sickle and chain was made out of normal steel, but I’d used techniques from creating Tama’s *kunai* and *shuriken* to make the whip sword so it could pull off all kinds of tricky movements.

“Whoa, I can’t believe you actually made them!”

When I produced the weapons from Storage, Arisa exclaimed in surprise.

While I was at it, I showed off the drill mode I’d added to the whip sword just for kicks.

“Ooooh, it’s so cool to see made-up weapons right before your eyes.”

“I wanna tryyy!”

“Me too, sir.”

Warning them to be careful, I handed over the sickle and chain and the whip sword.

Sure enough, Pochi got tangled up in the sickle and chain in no time, but Tama was pretty good with the whip sword.

“I think I make a better samurai than ninja, sir.”

“Then the brilliant Arisa will teach you all about real Japanese samurai, too!”

Pochi was pouting a little, so Arisa started spouting off stories about fictional samurai. “Don’t get too carried away,” I warned her lightly, then went to help the other kids explore.

“There’s a tea set in this treasure chest.”

“It’s very unusual-looking, isn’t it?”

“I like how round and cute it is.”



There were twenty sets of white porcelain cups and dishes, along with matching spoons. The set even included a cute, fancy teapot. None of it had any magic tool-like functions, though.

The case containing the set had an inscription in the Ancient Language, so it must have been brought into the labyrinth long ago, not produced in here.

“Master, I have located a cup larvae in this light-brown material, I report.”

“That’s a milk pitcher.”

The light-brown stuff around the treasure chest seemed to be tea leaf dregs.

We found two other chests, but neither contained anything particularly interesting, just gold coins and jewels.



“Yessss, I hit level fifty!”

By the last day of our somewhat lengthy labyrinth expedition, everyone but Mia had hit level 50.

“Congratulations. All that hard work paid off.”

Mia, who required more EXP to level up than the rest, looked a bit sulky, so I decided to take her to do some extra leveling up soon.

“Wiiings?”

Seconds after Tama tilted her head, I heard a small gunshot elsewhere in the labyrinth.

Lulu peered through the scope of her laser gun. “It’s a bring bird.”

She waited for the bird to come to rest on a far-off cliff and sniped it down.

Bring birds moved incredibly quickly, distorted the space around them to make them difficult to locate, and could even use Short-Range Teleportation.

They were tough to hit from a distance even for me.

“That’s our Sniper King. I could never have hit that with my Spellblade Shot.”

Liza looked like a proud older sister as she praised Lulu’s progress.

Since Lulu's marksmanship had improved, she'd gained titles like Magic Marksman and Sniper King.

"...Mrrr, evil."

"Hi-yaaaah!"

As soon as Mia spoke a warning, Arisa used a chant-less Fire Magic spell.

The smallish maze cockroach that had been approaching from the darkness went up in flames.

"There are way too many maze cockroaches and maze rats in the Middle Stratum."

"Maybe they make good prey for the other monsters?"

Both reproduced quickly and could survive even in the toughest conditions. Most likely, the maze rats fed on the smaller maze cockroaches, and then other monsters ate the maze rats.

They might make good targets for leveling up the Echigoya Company girls. I made a note in my memo tab.

"Master, have I gained a new skill? I inquire."

"Not yet, but you got a new Foundation slot."

"Please install additional techniques when we return, I request."

Nana latched on to me urgently.

All right, all right, just stop shoving those up against me.

"Also... Arisa."

"Me?"

I looked at Arisa and nodded toward Tama and Pochi, prompting her to check out their stats.

"No way! One-Stroke Kill and Ninjutsu?"

Ever since Arisa had told them stories about fictional samurai and ninja, Tama and Pochi had been playing around with the katana we found whenever they had a chance, which had probably resulted in them gaining these skills.

I guess it's true that you should do what you love.



“So this is the Room of Trials where one fights a floormaster? I inquire.”

“That’s right.”

I nodded. Since most of the group had reached level 50, we were celebrating with a field trip to check out the Room of Trials in the Upper Stratum.

“It’s pretty big, huh?”

The area we were in, section 66, consisted solely of this room, the Room of Trials.

It was big enough to hold five giant monster fish at once, and the ceiling was over 150 feet high.

There was an altar in the middle of the room; if one placed an areamaster core there and chanted a summoning incantation, the floormaster would appear.

The majority of the room was flat and empty, while stone steps encircled the outer edges like arena seats.

...No, wait. It looked flat because it was so big, but there were actually large seven-to-ten-foot rocks scattered throughout the room aside from the center, so there’d be no shortage of cover. Although there was no telling if those would actually be sturdy enough to protect from a floormaster’s attack.

We’d have to clear out the many monsters prowling amid the rocks before fighting the floormaster.

“We could probably take on a floormaster soon, no?”

“As long as it’s a good match for your abilities.”

According to the guild documents, the floormasters in the Upper Stratum were around level 55. My group should be able to handle one as long as it wasn’t a particularly disadvantageous matchup.

“Want to take a look?”

“Huh? You mean, summon a floormaster right now?”

Arisa looked panicked, so I smiled reassuringly. “No, no. Jelil’s team is fighting the floormaster of the Middle Stratum right now. I thought we could go observe if you’d all like.”

“Let’s gooo?”

“I want to see, too, sir.”

“Yes, it should be quite educational.”

“Yes, master. Let us go, I request.”

The vanguard team seemed very interested in observing the fight.

“What would you girls like to do?”

“Let’s check it out, of course!”

“Mm. Agreed.”

“Yes, me too.”

Once the rearguard team agreed as well, I led the way to the Middle Stratum through section 1.

Because we were traveling in secret this time, I gave each of them a transparency cloak from the City Core treasure room so we could conceal ourselves.

“Ooh, they’re really going at it.”

We took a slightly roundabout route to reach the Room of Trials where Mr. Jelil and company were fighting the Middle Stratum’s floormaster.

The first sight that greeted us was the ice ivy emperor, a plant monster covered in frozen snow crystals, thrashing around in battle.

It was only level 55, so that was probably the lowest-level floormaster that could appear in the Middle Stratum.

“Looks like they changed the whole setup of the Room of Trials to work to their advantage.”

“A long, thin pit?”

“That’s a trench. We use those sometimes when we make encampments,

no?”

“Clever.”

“I agree with Mia, I declare.”

The girls seemed impressed with the way the group was using the terrain to its advantage for a long-term battle.

“See-throoough?”

“It seems kind of faint, sir.”

Tama and Pochi pointed out the ivy monster’s semitransparent state.

“Looks like it has a special phase-through ability.”

Magic Swords and spells would work on it, but attacks like catapults and crossbows appeared to have little effect. The battering ram and wrecking ball on the far end of the room probably wouldn’t see any action this time, then.

“Jelil’s pretty amazing.”

“Powerful.”

Mia nodded.

Jelil was fighting fearlessly on the front lines, wielding the Flame Sword I’d lent him.

The ice ivy emperor appeared to be weak to the fire attribute—it withdrew its vines whenever Jelil’s sword approached.

On top of that, it didn’t seem to be able to keep up its phase-through ability when it was flinching, so other attacks besides Jelil’s and the mages’ on the back lines could affect it.

The monster’s health gauge in my AR display was already quite low. Their victory was probably drawing near.

“They’re all awfully low on stamina. Wonder how long they’ve been fighting?”

“Well, I know the ice ivy emperor already appeared when I was building the hot springs.”

Every night before bed, in order to get a sound sleep, I always checked my

map for demons, demon lords, and other strong monsters.

Hywooooohze.

Just as its health got down to 30 percent, the ivy monster let out a shrill noise like a flute.

“Magic gone.”

“Geh, does it have some kind of magic-dampening skill?!”

Mia and Arisa exclaimed in surprise.

“No, it’s a race-specific skill that neutralizes magic.”

I pointed at Mr. Jelil’s Flame Sword: The fire was returning to it as he fell back.

“That’s a nasty ability. If a flying monster had something like that, Lulu would be the only one who could fight it.”

“Yes, we’ll have to devise some sort of countermeasure.”

Enthusiastic as always, Arisa and Liza were already discussing strategy.

Hywooooohze.

Over on the battlefield, the monster shrilled again, almost as if it were laughing at the confusion it had caused.

“The roots over there are moving, sir.”

“Ruuumble?”

“Why’s the ground shaking?”

“Mrrr?”

The younger kids noticed something strange.

Right before our eyes, vines burst out of the ground at Jelil’s and his party’s feet.

Some of them emerged amid the middle and rear guard, spraying ice thorns that tore through their thin defenses.

“Aaah!”

“Extreme danger warning, I report.”

“There will be no avoiding casualties at this rate.”

Just as Nana and Liza said, Jelil’s middle and rear guard were in danger.

Jelil himself was fine, but some of the heavily armored vanguard were trapped in place by the wildly thrashing roots.

According to my AR, it had gone into **rampage mode**, an appropriate name for the desperate way it was attacking seemingly at random.

“Master, should we help them?”

“Maybe a little. I’ll go lend a hand.”

I could probably just buy time for them to get back on their feet.

Transforming into Kuro, I went up near the ceiling and positioned myself above the ice ivy emperor.

With a loud rumble, the monster burrowed into the bare earth.

The dust blocked my vision, so I dispersed it with the Wind Magic spell Gust.

When more ivy sprouted from the ground and started flailing around, I used Magic Hand to limit its movements.

This part didn’t seem to have the magic-neutralizing effect.

“Who are you?!” Jelil shouted.

“Forget about that. Just get yourselves regrouped.”

Easily dodging the attacks from the enraged ice ivy emperor, I used Magic Hand to pick up the injured party members and move them to safer ground in the back.

“We’re done evacuating! You should run, too.”

It hadn’t even been ten minutes, but the group had already recovered enough to retreat.

Impressed with their efficiency, I tossed a flash bomb and a smoke bomb at the floormaster, then retreated to the back with Jelil and his party.

“Thank you for your aid. I am Jelil of Red Dragon’s Roar. Might I know the name of our rescuer?”

“I am Kuro, a follower of the Hero.”

Mr. Jelil wanted to thank me, but I insisted that I’d just found them by chance and left with Return.

Once I met back up with my kids, we watched as Jelil and his party regrouped.

This time, they positioned their rear guard in a safe place and arranged a few tanks around the vicinity to increase security. I appreciated their cautious approach.

We went back to a teleport point in the Upper Stratum, removed the transparency cloaks, and headed for the exit.

“Do you think we’d be able to beat that?”

“No prooob?”

“Easy, sir.”

“Don’t be too overconfident.”

Pride was a dangerous thing, but I did think my group would be able to fight a floormaster like that injury-free with their current equipment.

“Once Mia reaches level fifty and we do some preparations, would you like to try?”

The girls all looked at one another, then turned toward me and nodded in unison.

“Let’s do it! We’ll win for sure,” said Arisa.

“Yes, of course,” Liza agreed.

“Let’s gooo?”

“Yeah, sir!”

Tama and Pochi cheered, prompting the others to do the same.

I guess I’d better start preparing, too, then.

Preparations

Satou here. It's important to always be prepared. But if you overdo the prep, you'll end up saddled with a bunch of useless baggage. I think the best approach is specific mental simulations.

"Welcome back, mister."

When we left the labyrinth, we ran into Miss Jena of the Lovely Wings, who was leading a group of the explorers' school students.

"Hey, Jena. You heading out for field training?"

"Yes, it's our first time."

Jena seemed almost as nervous as the students behind her.

Maybe I should send one or two of my kids with her? I was a little worried about her being in command on her own for the first time.

"It's Usasa and Rabibi?"

"And Gaugaru, sir."

Tama and Pochi spotted some friends among the scholarship students, who were too nervous to give anything but a short wave.

"Do you want to go with them, Tama and Pochi?"

"Can weee?"

"I wanna go, sir."

I'd had them change into normal gear before we went back to section 1 with Return, so it was probably safe to let them be seen in combat. Just in case, though, I warned them not to participate in battle unless someone's life was in danger.

"Sorry, Jena, but would you mind taking these two along?"

“I’d be more than happy to have them, but are you sure? Don’t they need a break after being in the labyrinth for so long already?”

“We’re fiiine?”

“Pochi could stay in the labyrinth for months, sir.”

Tama and Pochi puffed up their chests while wiping drool away from their chins; they were probably excited to eat grilled meat in the labyrinth every day.

“We’re bringing kids who aren’t even students...?”

“Do they think this is a game?”

I heard a few students grumbling among themselves.

“You’re gonna eat those words later, you idiots.”

“Yeah, you have no idea how amazing Miss Tama and Miss Pochi are!”

The kids who had seen Tama and Pochi in action before grinned wickedly at the others.

“We’ll be baaack!”

“I’m gonna do my best, sir.”

Unbothered by the students’ comments, Tama and Pochi waved to us brightly and went into the labyrinth with Jena and the others.

On the way home, we checked in on Iruna and the students at the explorers’ school and brought some frog meat to the orphanage as a souvenir.

Apparently, there had been some unwelcome visitors to the mansion while we were gone, including people campaigning to join our floormaster expedition and would-be thieves in the night, but the viceroy’s guards took care of the former, and the latter were caught by students who were camping out as part of their training.

During lunch the next day, Miss Iruna of the Lovely Wings appeared with a group of beastfolk in tow—two rabbitfolk and one ratfolk.

“Mister, this sorry bunch of losers is the Runaway Arrow party I told you about.”

“Don’t call us losers!”

“Why not? Anyway, mister, they’re up to their ears in debt after that chain-rampage incident, just like we were.”

According to Iruna, they’d been there when we first met the Lovely Wings in the maze-ant chain-rampage incident.

I didn’t remember their names or faces, but unlike that nasty Besso and his band of dastardly explorers, I did recall that they’d warned us to run as they passed us.

“Well, we can discuss the idea of long-term employment at...”

...Huh?

As I started speaking, something about the air around us felt strange.

Just as I checked our surroundings, a flock of birds took off from all of the nearby trees at once.

“Whoa!”

“What was that?”

“The birds—”

Before Iruna could finish speaking, the ground shook. It was probably about a magnitude three in Earth terms.

My “Sense Danger” skill didn’t react, but I was still a bit concerned, so I opened my map to look for anything unusual.

The only major change was that the Middle Stratum floormaster was gone, probably defeated by Mr. Jelil and his group.

...Huh?

For some reason, maybe because I’d rescued them as Kuro during their fight, I’d gained titles like Floormaster Slayer: Celivera Labyrinth Middle Stratum and Floormaster Ice Ivy Emperor Slayer.

“Whoa, that was a big one.”

“Are earthquakes common around here?”

“Earthquakes? If you mean earthshakes, there’s only one every few decades.”

Then what was that tremor about?

It definitely seemed like an omen of a demon lord appearing, so I turned on “Miasma Vision” to see if anything looked unusual, but there wasn’t a speck of miasma to be seen anywhere—no, in fact, it was suspiciously clean.

It was almost as if the labyrinth were collecting the miasma it needed from the outside, too.

Suddenly, the purple-furred dogfolk boy Crow came to mind.

Maybe when he disappeared like a ghost, it was because he’d been summoned into the labyrinth along with the miasma it was absorbing.

I didn’t have any proof to support this theory, but for some reason, that was the thought that crossed my mind.

“...Mister?”

“Oh, sorry. I just got a little lost in thought.”

I shook my head, ridding myself of the unanswerable questions I was pondering, and went back to the matter at hand.

“As you may have heard from Iruna, your first week will be a training period. As long as there aren’t any issues in that week, you’ll be hired as instructors. If you decide to quit, please let me know two weeks in advance.”

The three Runaway Arrows nodded.

Judging by their current debts, I could probably count on them to teach for at least three months.

Now that we had more instructors, I should probably start hiring other staff like secretaries and a principal before we opened up fully.

Maybe the guildmaster could help me with that?



“Red Dragon’s Roar has defeated a floormaster!”

Three days after we returned to the surface, I heard this announcement

outside the window of the guildmaster's office as we discussed hiring a principal for the explorers' school.

So the information had already reached Labyrinth City.

"Looks like they beat you to the punch, Satou."

The guildmaster turned to look at me from the window and grinned.

"I'd expect no less of Sir Jelil and his fine company."

She was clearly trying to goad me, but I didn't take the bait.

"Come on, my man—how can you always be this relaxed?"

"Well, it's not really a competition."

The person shouting outside seemed to have been sent ahead by Jelil's party. Mr. Jelil himself and the rest of his group were still in the Middle Stratum, so they probably wouldn't be back for another day or two.

"Now, I wonder how many of them will be coming back alive..."

The guildmaster looked anguished. She probably thought of them all as her own grandchildren.

Leaving her to her thoughts, I went about my business for the next few days: training with Mia in the afternoon so she would reach level 50 like the rest of the group and, at night, mass-producing Magic Swords for sale and airships for delivery or working on new equipment for my companions.

A few days later, Mr. Jelil made his triumphant return to the city.

The area around the labyrinth gates was packed with people hoping to see his return with their own eyes; those who couldn't fit into the plaza overflowed into the food-stall area or in front of the guild.

Soon, a cheer arose from the front of the crowd.

According to my map information, Mr. Jelil and his expedition had emerged from the gates.

"Come up here, Mr. Knight!"

"Yeah, your little ladies can't see a thing from there, I bet."

Some explorer acquaintances called out to us from the roof of a nearby shop, so I took them up on their generous offer.

“Thank you very much. The view from here is certainly excellent.”

“Yeah, although you can’t hear a word.” The bearded explorer grinned.

From above, we watched as Jelil and company stepped onto a platform that seemed to have been set up just for the occasion.

He was dressed in sparkling new armor and a crimson cloak, so he must have gone out of his way to change before leaving the labyrinth.

There were special seats in front of the platform for nobles who had supported the group’s venture.

The viceroy’s wife had backed them as well, but I didn’t see her in the seats, probably because Jelil would be going to visit her and the viceroy later.

“Everyone, thank you so much for gathering today to celebrate our return!”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up what Jelil was saying.

Seven high-level explorers stood proudly behind him, presumably the core members who’d played the biggest role in defeating the floormaster.

The rest of the group that had participated was standing behind the platform.

Considering the size of their group when we saw them enter, their numbers seemed to have lessened considerably.

“We’ve successfully defeated the Middle Stratum floormaster known as the ice ivy emperor.”

As Mr. Jelil spoke, one of the core members held up a crimson sphere the size of a beach ball.

“Behold! The core of the ice ivy emperor.”

The crowd exploded with cheers, making it difficult to hear what Jelil was saying.

Even my “Keen Hearing” skill couldn’t make out his words amid the noise, so I had Arisa use the Space Magic spell Clairaudience and my original spell Share Information, which was based on the Tactical Talk spell, to make his voice

audible to our group.

After introducing the parties who had participated and describing their hard work, Jelil read off the names of those who had fallen in battle, spoke of how bravely they'd fought, and had a priest from the expedition group perform rites for the fallen.

"Now, for those of you who wish to hear the details of our valiant battle, we will let the minstrels cover that later. For now, we shall reveal what most of you are waiting for: the spoils we won from the floormaster."

The first item Jelil produced was an elegant one-handed sword.

The fire-attribute Magic Sword I'd lent him was hanging at his waist.

"This is an Ice Sword, the Icetree Fang."

He charged the sword with magic, and the silver blade produced a gust of white snow, ice crystals blossoming around it.

The cheers from the crowd were so wild that I couldn't tell if they were excited or angry.

Still, I would think an Ice Sword would give your hand frostbite after a while.

Maybe if you used it with a thick, frost-resistant glove?

"This next item is a big one..."

One of the other explorers took over from Jelil to present the rest of the spoils.

The next few included various weapons, like a halberd with a lightning effect, and magic items of all shapes and sizes. There were shrieks from the noblewomen in the crowd at items like an egg-size ruby or a tiara decorated with a large emerald; adamantite and Damascus steel ingots elicited shouts from the bearded merchants.

If this were before I'd visited the Bolenan Forest, I was sure I would've been cheering right along with them.

As it was, I watched fairly calmly as the spoils were being introduced, but I couldn't suppress an exclamation at the next group of items.

“...Ooh!”

“Next we have three scrolls: the Summoning Magic spell Summon Vision, the Ghost Magic spell Create Lesser Undead, and the Space Magic spell Material Transfer!”

The crowd didn’t seem too excited, but I was dying to get my hands on those scrolls, especially that last one.

I probably couldn’t use it for making magic tools, but it sounded useful for delivering letters or evidence while in disguise as Kuro or apprehending criminals.

“Master, looks like there are some Gift Orbs next,” said Arisa.

“I wonder if they’ll have anything good,” I replied.

There appeared to be three of them, so it was possible that one might contain something we could use.

“The first orb contains Poison Resistance, a hot commodity for anyone concerned about their health.”

You mean nobles who are worried about being poisoned?

“The second orb contains Light Magic, the famous signature of Holy Knights.”

This drew cheers from explorers, merchants, and nobles alike.

When I had been drinking with Miss Helmina of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga and her Holy Knights, they told me that Light Magic was required to become a Holy Knight, so Light Magic orbs were sold at extremely high prices.

“And the final orb is...”

The explorer who was presenting the items froze.

It must be some really incredible item.

“N-no waaaaay!”

Okay, out with it already.

“It’s the mark of a true master swordsman, a ‘Spellblade’ ooooooorb!”

“““Aaaaaaaah!””””

The explorers and merchants roared at this so loudly that I thought the earth might shake again.

It was so loud that the nearby birds flew away.

Arisa tugged on my sleeve and held out a handwritten note.

- 1. Really? That's nice.*
- 2. Please give it to me!*
- 3. I'll take it from you even if I have to kill you!*

It was a reference to some famous dialogue tree in a console game.

Surely, nobody would actually go that far for a single orb, right?

Although I guess I'd understand if it contained Chant.



"We're here!"

There was a celebratory parade being held after the presenting of the spoils, so I went to see it with my companions.

A succession of beautiful young women came first, dressed up showily and scattering rose petals.

Next came Mr. Jelil and company, resplendent in shining armor, eliciting cheers and envy from the young explorers in the crowd.

"This is quite a reception."

"Sure is. But you realize you won't always be watching from the sidelines, right?"

"...What?"

Lulu blinked at Arisa.

"Once we defeat a floormaster in the Upper Stratum, we'll be on the receiving end of all this. So we have to start thinking about our outfits now!" Arisa grinned.

"Mew?"

“We’re gonna be like that, sir?”

Tama’s and Pochi’s eyes widened.

“But of course!” Arisa exclaimed in an old-timey voice.

“Très bieeeen?”

“That’s amazingly amazing, sir!”

Tama and Pochi threw up their arms.

“We shall have to work even harder in the meantime, then.”

“Aye-aye!”

“Yes, sir!”

At Liza’s words, Tama and Pochi struck dramatic poses.

“We shall absolutely succeed, I declare.”

“Mm. Agreed.”

“Yes, let’s do our best!”

The other girls all joined the beastfolk trio in declaring their resolve.

“All right, guys, let’s do this!”

“““Woooo!”””

Arisa pumped her fist in the air, her infectious enthusiasm prompting the others to do the same.

And just like that, we headed for the labyrinth.



“All right, I’ll be back in a bit.”

Once we arrived in the labyrinth, we went to an area with relatively strong monsters so the group could practice with their equipment, which I’d finished fine-tuning.

Nana’s, Tama’s, and Pochi’s swords had been revised to use a mostly orichalcum alloy, so now they were as noticeably shiny as the armor. The swords required more magic to expand and contract now, but they’d gotten 30

percent stronger in exchange.

I'd also used blue for the magic circuits, making them resemble a Holy Sword like Liza's Dragon Claw Spear, which I had altered only by changing the handle to orichalcum. I hoped to try to find a way to enhance Liza's Magic Cricket Spear soon, because she wanted to keep using it.

"I want to extend invitations to your teachers and stop by the royal capital, too."

I was planning to invite the elf teachers to witness the girls' triumph over a floormaster.

"Are you making arrangements for the dummy troops, too? Will it take long?"

"No, I'll be back by this evening."

Arisa was referring to finding other members to fight the floormaster alongside our group.

It would frankly be abnormal for a single party of eight people to defeat a floormaster, so I was planning to employ some living dolls, which the elves of Bolenan often used for labor.

Naturally, the girls would be the only ones to do any actual fighting.

"Oh, right—make sure you don't go near the magi hydra, since it can use a hypnosis attack."

I gave one final warning before I left.

Since this monster had a magic-neutralizing race-specific ability, it would make a good mock battle for a floormaster, but I forbade them from fighting it out of fear of what might happen if they were hypnotized into attacking one another.

"Awww, c'mon. This veil would protect us from that anyway, right?"

Arisa pointed at the veil I'd added to her new armor.

Because the rear guard's heads weren't protected enough, I'd made a circlet with a long veil that would protect them in battle against the floormaster.

Unlike a delicate lace wedding veil, this was made out of golden orichalcum

fibers, so it was as resistant to physical and magic attacks as it was beautiful.

“I don’t know for sure. Let’s wait to test it out until I get back.”

“All riiight.”

I’d enhanced the girls’ armor to resist hypnosis, evil eyes, and so on, but you could never be too careful.

I decided to stop by Paradise Island on my way to the Bolenan Forest.

There were many rumors lately about demon lords being revived, so I wanted to get some information on one such candidate, the Dogheaded Demon Lord.

Rei, who lived on Paradise Island, was the last survivor of the Lalakie dynasty and had been alive some twenty thousand years ago when the Dogheaded Demon Lord was last active.

“The Dogheaded Demon Lord?”

Rei looked down despondently.

“Yes, I wanted to know what kind of demon lord he was.”

“I was never on the battlefield, so I can’t say for sure how strong he was. But from what I’ve been told, he was strong enough to easily bring down even the floating castle in spite of its Heavenslight Protection and Divine Wrath Cannon.”

My concentrated laser had been strong enough to break through the Heavenslight Protection, too, but it had warded off the physical and magical attacks of the Sea Lord (which was related to Doghead). It was pretty strong by this world’s standards.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be any help...”

“No, that was more than enough, thank you.”

Rei hung her head, so I thanked her.

“I wonder if you’re still suffering, longing for freedom... Cr...”

As she turned away, she murmured so quietly that even my “Keen Hearing” skill barely picked it up.

I didn’t catch the rest of the person’s name, but given the context, I was

guessing the topic of the Dogheaded Demon Lord had reminded her of an old friend.

I said a silent prayer for this “Cr__” person, who had likely died a violent death at the hands of the demon lord.

“Sister? Are you all right?”

“Don’t worry... It’s nothing.”

Her younger sister, Yuuneia, pressed closer, but Rei just shook her head with a forced smile.

Rei didn’t seem to want to discuss the matter any further, so I took my leave from Paradise Island and moved on to Bolenan Forest.

“You’re going to fight a floormaster already?”

“Reckless.”

“That’ll be dangerous if they’re not at least level fifty.”

When I told our teachers about the plan, they wanted us to wait.

“Don’t worry. They’re all level fifty already.”

At that, the group exclaimed in surprise.

“You’re not doing power leveling, are you?!”

“No, except to catch Mia up on experience points occasionally.”

We’d been using high-efficiency equipment, potions, and restoring their health and magic in battle, but I didn’t think that counted, since they were referring to having someone else weaken a monster and letting a lower-leveled person get the kill to gain experience points.

“All right. Then we’ll accept your offer.”

Mr. Hishirotoya spoke on behalf of the elf teachers.

“Is there anything we can help with?”

“Actually, yes, I did want to ask a favor...”

I explained my request for dummy troops, and they agreed right away to help.

We were fighting the floormaster in three days, so I'd planned to just borrow the living dolls the elves used for labor. However, some of the spriggans, leprechauns, trolls, and other fairies who lived in Bolenan Forest volunteered to come, as well as some beastfolk warriors who lived on the outskirts of the forest.

"You don't need to come get us. Just give this medal to Lelillil. I'll harness the power of the dryad and the World Tree to open an Elf Road."

This came from none other than the high elf Miss Aaze.

Even wearing a smug expression, she was so cute, I wanted to rub my cheek against hers.

"That's very impressive."

"Well, it's only possible because the World Tree has bountiful magic now. That's all thanks to your help in clearing away the Evil Jellies that were defiling it, Satou."

Miss Aaze bashfully deflected the compliment by bringing up old times.

Opening an Elf Road straight into Labyrinth City would probably be unwise for several reasons. We decided she would link it to one of the mountains that surrounded the city instead.

"Oh, right. Miss Aaze..."

I asked the high elf if she knew anything about the demon lords who had appeared in Labyrinth City in the past.

"Mm, we rarely interfere with the outside world, so I'm afraid not..."

Besides, demons and demon lords had apparently never attacked the elf forest before.

I asked the elf teachers, too, since they'd been to Labyrinth City before, but they didn't really have any information; they hadn't been there for any attacks.

After Miss Aaze bid me farewell to start preparing, I headed to the royal capital to deliver some airships and Magic Swords.

Along the way, I exterminated monsters who were attacking livestock,

rescued a noble's carriage that was being raided, and other such situations that Arisa probably would've been thrilled about, but I'll omit those, since they weren't particularly notable.

While I was there for the delivery, I met with the Echigoya Company team, but they looked busy with preparing to open the storefront, arranging contracts for carriers between Labyrinth City and the royal capital, and so on, so I didn't stay for long.

I could probably trust Miss Manager and Tifaleeza to take care of all that.

The girls in the tenement houses in Labyrinth City were beginning work as the Echigoya Company Celivera Branch, too, and I had already registered the former carrier Polina as the head of the branch.



"Satou!"

As was often the case, Mia was the first person to spot me returning with souvenirs from the royal capital. From what I gathered, teleportation spells caused the spirits to flutter about, giving her a few seconds' advance warning.

When I'd left the labyrinth, the group was at the hunting grounds, but now they had already finished their fighting for the day and returned to the labyrinth vacation home with Arisa's Space Magic.

"I knew it! It's master, sir!"

"Welcoome!"

Next, Pochi and Tama came running over from the house.

These two seemed to be able to sense the shift in space or magic that preceded my teleportation. They couldn't explain how, so I guess even they didn't really understand what exactly they were sensing.

The three all arrived at once:

Mia jumped at me head-on with a *whump*.

Tama hopped up as if to clothesline me and landed on my shoulders, wrapped around my neck piggyback-style. She exclaimed, "Glomp!" as she did so, which was probably Arisa's fault.

Pochi crashed into me headfirst, hard enough to knock out a full-grown bear. I used my Magic Hand to catch her gently so she wouldn't smack the back of Mia's head with her knee.

"Arisa saaaaid..."

Pochi looked up at me, teary-eyed.

"...What happened?"

I tried to get her to explain, but she just kept whining and repeating, "Arisaaa...", over and over. Liza often told them not to speak ill of others, so she sometimes had trouble voicing a problem with other people.

"Unstable."

Mia poked her head out from behind the clinging Pochi to explain, but I didn't know whether she meant Pochi or Arisa. At times like these, I wished she'd use a few more words.

"Flying off the tooop?"

Does she mean "flying off the handle" or "blowing her top," maybe?

Still sitting on my shoulders, Tama mussed my hair while peering down at me.

Since I couldn't get a straight answer out of any of them, I decided to see what was going on with Arisa for myself.

"I brought souvenirs, so why don't we eat and talk things over?"

"Meeeat?"

"Sweets?"

"A bit of both."

The three of them all got excited at that.

When my eyes met Pochi's, she mumbled, "I have a separate stomach for meat, sir!" and looked away, pretending to whistle innocently.

If that was the case, I would love to know exactly what went into her "main" stomach.

"Welcome back, master."

“Thank you, Lulu.”

I handed Lulu a Garage Bag full of ingredients as she greeted me at the door, and I gave her some instructions on how to prepare them.

As soon as I entered, I heard Arisa arguing loudly.

“Look, that’s what I keep trying to tell you! Our first attack should be a big magic blast from a distance, to take away their weapons and mobility!”

“I disagree. If that attack draws too much ire from the enemy, you and the rest of the rear guard could be in danger, I declare.”

“We could always teleport away to get rid of the aggro.”

“It is far too risky. Besides, they say it is a warrior’s honor to be the first to strike. We in the vanguard should strike to wear down the enemy, and once it goes into rampage mode, you and the rear guard can drive it into a corner with magic.”

“But, Liza, then someone could get hurt in the meantime, like you or Tama and Pochi!”

“Arisa, you should worry about me, too, I insist.”

“But you’re the tank, Nana! You took a triple attack of magic, fire breath, and fangs from a magi hydra without even a scratch, remember? I’m sure you could take on an intermediate demon just as easily!”

“That was only because of my equipment and new abilities, I declare. Any praise for that should be directed to master, I recommend.”

Things seemed to be getting pretty heated.

...Wait, had they fought a magi hydra after I’d specifically warned them not to because of its hypnosis attack?

Unless it went after them first, I’d better give them a good scolding after dinner.

“Ah! Master!”

“Welcome back, sir.”

“I celebrate master’s safe return, I declare.”

Noticing my arrival, Arisa and the others paused their argument to greet me.

“Thanks.” At any rate, I had the gist of the situation now. “So, Arisa, Liza, and Nana were debating over strategy, and you thought they were fighting, Pochi?”

“Yes, but also no, sir.”

Hmm.

“Arisa is going too far, sir.”

“Whaaat? C’mon! I just said Lulu should use her rifle to shoot down a bring bird, that’s all.”

“Arisa, it’s hard enough to hit a bring bird with my laser gun, so it’s asking an awful lot to try and hit it with an actual bullet from a rifle, you know.”

Lulu placed a hand firmly on the table as she rebuked Arisa.

“But you did it before, didn’t you?”

“With a scope, and only when it came to rest on top of a cliff. I don’t think I could hit one flying around like Pochi did.”

Lulu tapped her chin in a cute gesture of thought as she responded, then headed to the kitchen with the ingredients I’d given her.

“So Pochi hit one?”

“Yes, I did, sir...with a Spellblade Shot.”

Pochi mumbled that last part. She must have gotten impatient with trying to hit it with bullets and used the end of the rifle like a sword to fire a Spellblade Shot.

“Pochi’s amaziing? Curved a Spellblade Shoooot!”

Settling onto my knee, Tama looked up at me and gleefully reported Pochi’s accomplishments.

Tama had accidentally fired a curved Spellblade Shot before, but this time it sounded like Pochi had managed to deliberately curve it after firing, like a certain space pirate captain. *I’ll have to try that, too, sometime.*

“But why were you practicing with a rifle in the first place?”

“In case we need to fight something that’s too dangerous to approach,” Arisa responded.

“Wouldn’t Spellblade Shot be good enough for that?”

“Not if it has magic-neutralizing abilities. Besides, I bet some floormasters can fly, and they’d probably have high resistance to magic. So I wanted to make sure we had some long-distance physical-attack options.”

I see, so that’s what happened.

“In that case, we do have buckshot for the rifle.”

“Yeah, but then we run the risk of friendly fire, and they wouldn’t be strong enough anyway.”

“If you use accelerating bullets, I’m sure even a buckshot could do some serious damage.”

With enough acceleration, one of those could probably even take down a warship.

“Okay, that’s enough of that! We can continue this discussion after dinner, please.”

Having finished preparing the food, Lulu clapped her hands together to get everyone’s attention and declared an end to the debate, which was probably the right move. If someone didn’t forcibly bring it to a close, the discussion could go on until dinner got cold.

“Ooooh! Is this marbled beef? Where did you find it?”

“Yeah, on my way back from the royal capital, I noticed a ranch that was being attacked by giant monsters. I drove the monsters off, and they gave me this as thanks.”

The ranch apparently served the royal family, and as a token of their appreciation, they had given me meat from the Ohmi cattle the monsters had been eating.

The owner had apologized for the “damaged goods,” but it was hard to find fault with the gorgeous combination of lean and fatty meat before my eyes.

But I had to be thankful to the man's ridiculous standards, since it meant I got paid in goods instead of gold for my services.

Now there were ten huge plates of thin-sliced meat laid out beautifully on the table. And next to that was a particularly shaped pot that was giving off steam.

"Mmmgh... I never thought I'd get to eat *shabu-shabu* again when I came here!"

"Mr. Meat is so flat, sir?!"

"Dieeet?"

Pochi and Tama lowered themselves to table height to confirm the thinness of the meat, then looked up at me in confusion. They probably thought that meat was best served in big, thick portions.

Heh-heh-heh. I'm about to show them how delightfully wrong they are.

"So this is called *shabu-shabu*, and it—"

"Forget about that! Let's just dig in!"

Arisa urgently cut off my explanation, so I let the meal begin.

The big plates of meat were surrounded by bottles of sesame sauce and ponzu, condiment dishes, and other various accoutrements. The condiments included grated daikon radish, carrot, and ginger, as well as minced onions, green perilla, and green onions, plus the leftover sesame seeds from making the sauce, crushed nuts, wasabi, and more, each in its own bowl. This kind of meal was always more fun with lots of options.

I'd thought about preparing some crab and sashimi in addition to the beef, but since this was our first time having *shabu-shabu*, I decided to focus on the beef only.

"You pick up a single piece of meat with chopsticks like this, dunk it quickly in the hot water, then dip it in sauce and eat it."

I demonstrated each step as I explained.

First, I sampled the meat with a little bit of plain ponzu sauce. I could immediately see why this ranch was the royal family's exclusive provider of

Ohmi beef.

The quality rivaled the Kobe beef and *Matsusaka* beef that my company had treated me to a long time ago. The tuna we ate in the south sea might have matched its melt-in-the-mouth texture, but only beef had this distinctively delicious flavor.

“You can use whatever condiments you want, but try it with just the sauce first.”

At my suggestion, Liza picked up a piece of meat and dipped it in the water, her expression unnecessarily intense.

Because some of the girls still weren't very good with chopsticks, especially Pochi and Tama, I gave them thin tongs to use instead, since it might fall into the water if they used a fork. I made four sets of tongs, each with a different pattern imprinted on the handle: a dog, a cat, a chick, and a rabbit. Nana snatched up the chick-patterned tongs immediately.

“Mmmm. That's gotta be at least an A5 rank! I could eat this stuff forever.”

“It's delicious, sir. Ay-five meat is as strong as whale and tuna, sir!”

“Yummyyy?”

“The sesame sauce is invincible, I report.”

“Miss Nana, it's delicious with ponzu and grated daikon radish, too.”

“Mm. Yummy.”

The whole group praised the meal unilaterally as they ate. Even Mia seemed to enjoy its light taste, despite her usual aversion to meat.

Liza alone was chewing in complete silence, but her eyes were crinkled shut with happiness, so she was probably just absorbed in the flavor. I was happy to let her enjoy it however she saw fit.

Arisa, Pochi, and Tama were stuffing their cheeks like chipmunks. I had over two hundred pounds of the stuff; they could eat as much as they liked, although Arisa should be careful not to overeat.

“Aaaah, sesame sauce still reigns supreme, but ponzu is so good, too! And

who knew condiments could totally change the flavor like this?”

“Arisa, you can’t fool me by pushing the wasabi toward me while you say that, sir. Even I learn from experience, sir.”

Pochi saw through Arisa’s plan magnificently but then shrieked when she took a bite out of one of the meat-wrapped green peppers I’d made as a side dish. She must’ve found the spicy one I threw in.

“Sesame sauce, yummy.”

“All so tastyyy?”

“Weh, it’s so good, I’m afraid I’ll eat too much.”

It was fun to watch all of them choose different dipping sauces and condiments.

Lulu was trying to hold off out of fear of gaining weight, but the allure of the Ohmi beef was threatening to break her will.

“Delicious.”

Liza was eating hers in an unusual way: dunking it in the hot water, then adding a little wasabi and soy sauce.

I decided to give it a try. I’d normally reserve that method for sashimi, but it was actually pretty good.

“Myaaa!”

“Spaishee, shir.”

“Tricked.”

Unfortunately, Tama, Pochi, and Mia all decided to copy us, too, and rolled around clutching their mouths and noses.

I burst out laughing despite myself, prompting the three of them to pummel me with their tiny fists.

“Sorry, sorry. Here, drink this.”

I gave the teary-eyed young trio mugs of hot chocolate with extra milk to wash down the wasabi.

“Mmmm, I’m sooo full. Is that hot chocolate? Let’s make chocolate fondue and cheese fondue sometime!”

Noticing the hot chocolate, Arisa came at me with a new request. I’d eaten a lot of cheese fondue back on Earth, but I never had chocolate fondue. It might be fun to try making it once.

“What’s fun-doo, sir?”

“It’s when you put chocolate or cheese on fondue meat. The fondue bird is only found near the clearest of mountain springs, so it’s considered a mythical dish.”

“Fondue huntiiing?”

“Let’s find some, sir!”

“Doubtful.”

Pochi and Tama fell for Arisa’s tall tale, but Mia saw through it immediately.

Apparently, Daisaku the Hero had imparted the knowledge of cheese fondue unto Bolenan Forest, too.

The day after the *shabu-shabu* feast, I made some medicinal cooking that would be easy on the stomach, but for some reason, everyone shot it down.

“No meeeeat!”

“Pochi is sorry, sir. So please give us a liiiittle bit of meat, sir.”

Tama and Pochi looked up at me with round, pitiful eyes; they seemed to think it was some kind of punishment.

Adorably, Pochi illustrated the “liiiittle” part by holding two fingers close together.

“Tama. Pochi. It is far beyond our station to make demands of the food master so kindly provides us.”

Liza reprimanded the two, but her voice sounded hollow.

She seemed to be equally shocked about the lack of meat.

I used chicken bones to make the broth, so it shouldn’t taste that bad...

“I don’t want this New Age vegetarian cuisine when I’m not even on a diet! Come on—give us some protein, please! WHERE’S THE BEEF?!”

To my surprise, even Arisa was upset.

I’d included tofu and beans, so there was still plenty of protein.

The other three liked vegetables to begin with, and they ate without complaint.

For the four meat lovers who demanded more protein, I cooked up some whale steaks and let them have as much as they wanted.

However, I stopped Arisa from eating too much, since her metabolism was low by nature as part of the rear guard.

The last thing I wanted was to be stuck dieting with her.



“Thank you for meeting us, Satou.”

As I waited by Labyrinth City’s south gate, I saw one of the elf teachers emerge from the sea of veria plants off the beaten path, with a few troll warriors in tow.

Trolls were a gentle fairy race of small, stout giants with green-tinted skin.

It was difficult to make out their appearance from a distance, since they were all wearing hooded cloaks.

“The others aren’t with you, Mr. Hishirotoya?”

“No, they’re waiting up in the mountains. I thought it might cause a fuss if we all entered at once, so we figured we’d come in groups of five or so, led by those of us who can speak Shigan language.”

That hadn’t even occurred to me; I was grateful for the elves’ foresight.

I used Light Magic to cast an illusion on the trolls to make them look like little giants, a more common race.

Mr. Hiya was wearing an Amulet of Humanity like the one Nana carried, disguising himself as a human.

I'd already told the guards at the south gate that I had guests visiting, so they let everyone through with just a quick check of the group's size and their races, which of course we had disguised.

"What in the world?"

"Are those the little giants who live in the east?"

"Damn, they're huge. Even bigger than the ogre I saw in the north once."

As I led Hiya and company toward the west guild, my "Keen Hearing" skill picked up on the chattering of the townspeople. They had probably never seen trolls before.

"Hey, isn't that young Master Pendragon leading the way?"

"What's he doing now? I don't see the little girls or that chick with the huge rack who're normally with him."

"Well, I heard Miss Liza of the Black Spear and Miss Lulu the Maid Queen went into the labyrinth a few days ago."

It seemed we'd become relatively famous among the young explorers in the city, maybe because of activities like the soup kitchen and such.

"Do you think he's bringing those little giants with him to beat the floormaster?"

"So he's gonna let money do the talking for him...? I wonder if he'd hire us, too."

"Don't even think about it. If a group who can bring down a beastly areamaster without a scratch is hiring help for this, then we wouldn't even be useful as meat shields."

Perfect. I'd accomplished my goal of a big crowd seeing me walking around with hired fighters.

By the time we arrived at the west guild, there were plenty of witnesses.

"Looks like the trolls should be able to enter without a problem."

The entrance to the guild was huge, so even the ten-foot-tall trolls would be able to walk inside.

“I’m Hishirotoya, a bronze-badge explorer. I’d like to register some group members.”

Hiya held up a rusty bronze badge as he spoke to the receptionist.

“O-of course. Will they be registering as wood badges?”

“That’s fine. I’ll be filling out the paperwork on their behalf, if that’s okay by you.”

The receptionist nodded, and Hiya went about registering the trolls.

We entered the labyrinth, and soon I teleported everyone to the party venue at the labyrinth hot springs with Return.

They’d completed their role already, but I didn’t want to just send them straight back, so I planned to let them enjoy the hot springs with a banquet and booze.

“Lord Satou, you’ve brought trolls first?! No wonder you wanted my help!”

Lelillil, whom I’d asked for help from the Ivy Manor, seemed very excited to welcome guests.

“Let me know if we’re running low on any supplies.”

“Don’t worry—there’s plenty of wine and mead!”

“I’ll let you take care of the welcome party, then.”

“Yes, sir! You can count on me, sir!”

Leaving the rest in the capable hands of Lelillil and her living dolls, I brought Mr. Hiya to the vacation house where the group was waiting for him.

After Hiya, I brought in the rest of the teachers along with spriggans, leprechauns, and other assorted races who were escorting them. The total was near a hundred people.

Fortunately, Lelillil’s grandfather Gillil and some other brownies came along as reinforcements, too, so we managed to set everything up without too much trouble.

I thanked Gillil and the others and brought the last two elf teachers to our original vacation home with Return.

“Yaaay, it’s Miss Poa, sir!”

“Mr. Shiya, hiii?”

Pochi and Tama spotted us first and waved their arms excitedly.

“Hey, Pochi! You been training or what?! Let’s do some practice later! Get your wooden sword ready!”

“Yes, sir!”

Pochi’s teacher, Miss Portomea, grinned as she hefted the magic Blue Rose Sword I’d given her.

Pochi scampered away into her room, then came running back with two wooden Magic Swords held above her head triumphantly. She looked like she was ready to start practicing right this second.

“Tama, you’re well, I see.”

“I’m doing great, indeeed?! Nin-nin!”

Tama’s teacher, Mr. Shishitouya, was a samurai-like elf. He spoke and carried himself like a noble warrior, but since he looked like a child, he reminded me of a cute little middle schooler trying to seem cool.

These two didn’t look to be in any hurry to start their own training, so I took them into the part of the vacation house where some of the others, like Liza’s teachers, Mr. Gurgapoya and Mr. Yusek; Nana’s teachers, Mr. Keriul and Miss Gimasarua; and Lulu’s self-defense teacher, Mr. Hishirotoya, were waiting.

“Hey, Shiya! Poa’s not with you?”

“She ran off to the garden to spar with Pochi already.”

“Honestly. She’s such a battle maniac.”

“Hear, hear.”

Speaking as a pacifist myself, I felt a kinship with the six teachers here.

“It seems I cannot hold a candle to you, Miss Liza.”

“No, I’ve never faced an opponent so strong as you, Sir Keriul.”

“Is that not counting Satou?”

“Oh, master is in a league of his own.”

Liza and Keriul the dwarf were chatting after their showdown, albeit one that hadn't involved swords.

The two of them were having less of a “wine tasting” and more of a “meat tasting” in a corner of the living room.

Liza was singing my praises, but I didn't consider my palate to be anything special. I could pick up on even slight differences in taste because my “Cooking” skill was so high, but I certainly couldn't distinguish the source or sex of the animal from a single bite like those two.

Although admittedly, I could get that information from my AR display.

Liza and Keriul weren't the only pair who was in their own little world.

“I thought so! So the biggest threats to watch out for are Neutralize Magic and the rampage mode they enter when their HP is low.”

The shadowfolk man Mr. Seoru was teaching Arisa about some of the dangers of fighting floormasters.

Apparently, he'd been in the party of the elf sage Mr. Trazayuya in Labyrinth City as a scout.

I'd invited him along when I heard that he had experience with defeating a floormaster, too.

“Miss Arisa, you are very strong. But a floormaster is in a class all its own. Even our master, who once drove off a dragon, failed two out of the three times he challenged one. If you determine that you cannot win, it is best to retreat with the utmost haste and wait for the next opportunity instead.”

“Thank you, Mr. Seoru! Don't worry—we'll be fine! We've got more tricks up our sleeves than you can shake a stick at. We're gonna crush it tomorrow! And afterward, we'll make a feast the likes of which you've never seen to celebrate!”

Somehow, Mr. Seoru's warnings seemed only to have stoked the flames of Arisa's excitement even further.

That's all well and good, but I'm the one who's going to have to make that

feast, right?

I wished she wouldn't raise the bar on me like that. Honestly, I felt like my repertoire was starting to run a bit dry.

I knew plenty of fairy cooking that the culinary research group of elves had taught me, but these elves were probably already sick of that.

I'd mostly been making western and Japanese dishes lately, so maybe I should shift my focus to Chinese food or dishes of my own devising.

"Is everybody ready?"

The next morning, I called to my armored-up group.

The vanguard was decked out in the shining orichalcum-alloy armor that had become their recent standard, and the rear guard were similarly resplendent in their magic-boosting orichalcum-fiber dress armor.

I'd made an orichalcum-fiber battle-maid outfit for Lulu, too, but the shining gold didn't feel right for a maid at all, so I covered it up with a plain layer of black on the outside. The bodysuit she wore underneath was made with silver hide.

Since Lulu was also in charge of protecting Arisa and Mia in case of emergencies, she was almost as heavily armored as Nana, despite being in the rear guard.

"Y-yes, master!" Liza responded in a stiff voice.

They all looked nervous about the upcoming floormaster battle, but the combat leader Liza and the commander Arisa looked particularly alarmed due to their extra responsibilities.

"Yes, sir! We've got plenty of box lunches and snacks, sir!"

"And bananas, toooo...?"

"Of course, sir! Bananas are in their own category, sir!"

Pochi and Tama posed with bananas in each hand.

My gaze swiveled toward Arisa immediately, but she was so nervous that she didn't even notice the accusing stare.

“Equipment inspection is complete as well. The box lunch Lulu made me contains a chick design, I report.”

Fully armored up, Nana produced the pouch containing her bento box from her Fairy Pack and showed it to me.

You three really shouldn't be prioritizing your lunches over your armor.

“Master, I want to open the gate to the Room of Trials.”

“All right. I'll help you 'see' it, then.”

I projected an image of the Room of Trials, the site where we would battle the floormaster, into the air.

Looking at it to confirm her destination, Arisa used Portal Door to create a gate leading there.

Space Magic spells like Teleport and Portal Door didn't require seal slates, but in exchange, the user had to know the destination very well or be able to visually confirm it.

“All right, let's go to the Room of Trials, then.”

We stepped through the gate to the Room of Trials together.

The girls had already cleared the room of monsters the day before. Thanks to them, there were no red dots on my radar now.

I waited for the group to finish preparing with support magic spells.

“So, what do you want to do? Should I be the one to summon the floormaster?”

“It's okay! I'll do it!”

It was the most dangerous role, so I volunteered, but Arisa's eyes shone as she insisted on doing it herself.

“Mr. Seoru said yesterday that you can't move for about ten seconds after the summoning.”

“I see. Make sure you activate some defensive magic first, though, okay? And don't let your guard down.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re such a worrywart.”

I refilled Arisa’s magic with Mana Transfer as I gave her a warning.

The group got into battle formation around the edges of the empty center of the room. The kind of magic they used would depend on the type of floormaster that appeared, so Mia was in a position where Nana and Lulu could protect her.

We’d also set up encampment areas, trenches, and pits the previous day.

“Okay! Everyone in position? Let’s get started!”

I used my Wind Magic to relay Arisa’s voice to everyone, since it would otherwise echo throughout the large room.

Arisa placed the core that would cause the summoning in the mysteriously patterned jar on the altar.

“I am one who would defy the impossible! Mortal though I may be, I defy gods and demons alike, even the very fabric of the world!”

In response to Arisa’s melodramatic incantation, red light flooded over the room and formed a summoning circle—like pattern.

“I have come to challenge a floormaster here and now, as proof of that determination!”

The summoning circle began to flicker slowly, almost like a pulse.

“Soon I shall come to thee with three proofs in hand!”

A low rumble began in time with the pulsing of the light, as well as a high-pitched noise like a buzzing in my ears.

“I am the challenger! O trial, appear before me now!”

The summoning circle lit up so brightly that it was almost painful to look at.

And then...

A humanoid figure rose out of the summoning circle.

The Dogheaded Demon Lord

Satou here. Unlike when I was young, it now takes time for me to adapt and take action when faced with an unexpected situation. Fortunately, the saving grace is that young people tend to take this pause as an adult staying calm.

“Pardon me. I took advantage of your little summoning circle.”

The figure who appeared above the summoning circle was a gentleman a little less than six feet in height.

He wore a well-made three-piece white suit with a matching coat and held a three-foot-long walking stick in one of his white-gloved hands.

“Don’t mind me. I believe the floormaster you were looking for will be along shortly, so please do go on with your battle.”

He tucked his silk hat under his arm as he addressed Arisa in a familiar manner.

“No way...”

Standing next to me, Arisa clutched my arm with a trembling hand.

“A...d-demon lord...,” she whispered.

In that instant...

The gentleman’s gaze turned toward us.

His calm manner disappeared immediately, replaced by a murderous hatred that felt like it was freezing the very air around us.

His violet eyes were terribly cold, like a vicious blizzard.

Just looking into them gave me goose bumps.

If I hadn’t had “Fear Resistance,” I might have screamed on the spot.

“Hrmph. You can see it?”

He looked down at Arisa, his purple dog’s head glaring as if at a mere pebble in its path.

I stepped in front of her protectively as I skimmed his information in my AR display.

...Not good.

What I read there sent a wave of panic through my mind.

“Yes, as you observed, I am a demon lord.”

The Dogheaded Demon Lord continued to look down on us as he confirmed Arisa’s fears.

His name in my AR display read _____, and he had self-contradictory titles such as **True Demon Lord, Demon Lord, Emancipator, Slaughterer, Savior, False God, and Enemy of the Gods.**

He was only about half my level but still the highest level I had seen besides my own. Worse, I couldn’t view his skills. An enemy this powerful might be able to break through my defense magic, so I had to proceed carefully or my companions might be hurt.

Ideally, I wanted to get everyone to a safe place before dealing with this.

I murmured to Arisa, who was frozen with fear, and picked her up gently so I could get her away at any moment.

“But fear not—I have no inclination to dispose of you.”

The demon lord stroked his purple-furred chin as one might stroke a beard, speaking to us with the confidence of the truly powerful.

“I only wish to defeat the gods and their fanatic believers. I would take no satisfaction in stomping out riffraff, so please refrain from trying to challenge me, hmm?”

Strangely, my “Sense Danger” skill didn’t react.

He must actually be serious about not intending to attack us.

“Master, I’ll buy us some time—”

Arisa's body glowed purple, and her orichalcum veil floated upward, exposing her lilac hair. I must've forgotten to rescind the permission I'd given her during the Lalakie incident.

"Arisa, wait."

I quietly stopped her.

"Oh-ho, no wonder you could see through me."

As the demon lord started to leave, he caught sight of Arisa's hair and turned back toward us.

"A seedling child who carries God Fragments within her, hmm? Allow me to give you a piece of advice, then."



“God Fragments”?

I remembered the small spheres of violet light that had appeared when I defeated the Undead King Zen and the demon lord called the Golden Boar Lord: strange glowing lights that spoke evil words in childlike voices.

Only a divine blade could touch those mysterious beings.

If I remembered right, those shards of light had indeed been called “fragments of a god.”

...Does that mean there’s some of those inside Arisa, too?!

I wanted to demand that he stop speaking nonsense, but unwelcome memories flashed through my mind.

The waves of purple light that engulfed her body whenever she used her Unique Skills.

The purple flash that appeared when the Undead King Zen, a reincarnation like Arisa, used his own Unique Skills.

And finally, the dark-purple aura when the demon lord I’d defeated in the ruins under the old capital, the Golden Boar Lord, used a Unique Skill.

They were all the same.

...Wait.

I remembered something strange Zen had said to me in his final moments.

“Destroy me, before I am completely transformed into a demon lord!”

And then there were the similarities with the Golden Boar Lord.

Could it be that these “God Fragments” were the source of supernatural Unique Skills, and at the same time...?

“No doubt you will figure out the truth eventually.”

While my mind was racing, the demon lord continued to speak.

“But do not despair, seedling child. Whether you give in to your emotions and lose all humanity to turn into a mad demon lord and be destroyed by a Hero or choose to become a rational demon lord like myself and fight against the world

is entirely up to the strength of your spirit.”

...Seriously?

If what he said was true, then my fears were virtually right on the mark.

After all, there were items in this world like short horns and long horns that could turn humans into demons.

Then could God Fragments turn humans into demon lords in the same way?

“Although it’s also up to you whether to become a demon lord or avert your eyes from the truth and live the life of a human.”

For a demon lord, he was almost nice—or at least, giving a surprising amount of free advice.

But I would’ve preferred that Arisa never hear about this at all.

“Be careful of Heroes. They are Parion’s hunting dogs... Heh-heh-heh, hunting dogs. A strange thing to hear from me of all people.”

The Dogheaded Demon Lord chuckled.

Without taking my eyes off him, I gave a hand signal to Nana and the others behind me.

Immediately, Nana and Lulu started casting physical and magical protection on everyone.

The signal meant *“a powerful enemy has appeared; be careful for your lives.”*

I decided to speak to the demon lord to try and confirm a few things.

“May I ask you a question?”

“I will not lend an ear to the drivel of a mere manservant. If you wish to speak to me, you ought to at least reach the level of the child you hold.”

The demon lord looked at me for the first time then. I’d forgotten that the level in my social-networking tab was still around 30 or so; I’d have to update it to more like that of the rest of my group later.

“Hmm?”

Looking at me suspiciously, the demon lord frowned as if he’d noticed

something.

He pressed his palm to his forehead, looking up toward the ceiling dramatically at a forty-five-degree angle. When he spoke to me, it was in a tired, irritated-sounding voice.

“What sort of whim would lead you to pretend to be human in a place like this?”

Could he tell somehow that I was level 310?

Even if so, it seemed rude to accuse me of pretending to be human.

“Enough playing around. I have far more important work to do, burning all the temples in this world to ashes...”

“The temples”...?

Like a flashback, the image of Sara’s dead body when the Golden Boar Lord had been resurrected came unbidden to my mind.

Then I thought of the head priestess’s and the other people of the Tenion Temple’s smiling faces.

You’re going to burn them down?!

I used “Warp” to jump over to Nana and push Arisa into her arms, then used “Warp” again to appear right in front of the demon lord, pressing a Holy Sword to his throat.

The tip of the blade stopped right before a sheet that had appeared in front of the demon lord, piercing through it ever so slightly.

This was an unusually short-tempered move for me. Maybe the attitude of Labyrinth City was rubbing off on me a little too much.

“...You’re as absurd as ever. How can you break through my Anti-Physical Shield that completely negates all physical attacks?”

“Sorry, but I’m afraid I can’t let that statement slide.”

Darn it, and here I thought we might actually be able to coexist with this demon lord. I shouldn’t have let my guard down just because he didn’t end all his sentences with some stupid word.

On top of that, I wished he would stop speaking to me like we were old acquaintances. I didn't recall seeing the Dogheaded Demon Lord anywhere on my friend list.

"You would stop me from burning the temples?"

"That's right."

I started thinking up a plan to defeat the demon lord—no, it was too cramped in here. The others might get caught in the cross fire.

"Let's step outside, shall we?"

I grabbed the demon lord's coat and teleported to the Return seal slate I'd placed in the stone temple in the great desert.

I thought the demon lord would resist, but surprisingly, he came along with me.

Hot, sandy air whipped against my cheeks.

"Wh-who's there?!"

Behind the demon lord, I heard a familiar voice.

Oh, crap.

I used my "Quick Change" skill to instantly transform into Nanashi the Hero, complete with the name and title to match.

The demon lord's body was between us, so I was pretty sure she hadn't seen my face, even if she might've glimpsed the rest of me.

Evidently, I'd accidentally arrived just as Miss Helmina of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga and her knights were investigating the stone shrine as part of their mission in the desert.

"Urk, it's a demon lord! R-run away!"

"D-demon lord?"

""""The Dogheaded Demon Lord!""""

"You mean the devil Doghead?!"

As soon as they heard the foxfolk officer's warning, the Holy Knights and Miss

Helmina all exclaimed in alarm.

“How noisy. Enough of this buffoonery...”

The demon lord snapped his fingers, and a barrage of magic crashed into the group.

The Holy Knights immediately raised their shields, but the shock waves sent them flying out of the shrine and down into the sand.

I brought out the City Core terminal I was keeping in Storage.

“Remove targets.”

“Order received. Removal commencing.”

I muttered an order to move Helmina and the rest of her group out of the territory and received a response in my mind from the City Core.

The lights on my radar disappeared, so I checked the map and saw that the dots indicating Helmina and the others had been moved to the mountain range bordering the Shiga Kingdom and the great desert.

“How magnanimous of you to feel pity for those fools.”

Noticing that I’d transported them away, the demon lord shook his head as if in disbelief.

To a demon lord like him, their lives must seem completely insignificant.

Just for the hell of it, I decided to try to talk him out of slaughtering all the people of the temples like he’d mentioned before.

“I don’t suppose you’d take back what you said before?”

“I’m afraid not. You might say it is my very reason for living. I became a demon lord solely to destroy the gods and their temples of puppets.”

Yeah, I was afraid of that.

Even though I’d gotten angry and drawn my sword on him before, I still would’ve preferred to talk this out and resolve things peacefully if at all possible.

But judging by the demon lord’s tone and attitude, that seemed impossible.

When the king of Lalakie, the kingdom of sorcery, told me the legends, he had said: *The evil Dogheaded Demon Lord relentlessly targeted pious priests and priestesses, and he sought to burn all the temples in the world.*

“Then I guess we have no choice but to fight...”

“Hmm. You’ll have killed me how many times now, then? But I shall still get in a few blows of my own from time to time. I do have my pride as the original demon lord who destroyed all the temples of the world some twenty thousand years ago, you know.”

So he already assumes he’s going to lose?

Even more important was the phrase “killed me how many times now.” So even if he got killed, he revived after a certain amount of time? I guess he could fight without reservations, then.

Well, if I can’t avoid a fight, then I’ll fight for all I’m worth.

If this guy was anything like the Golden Boar Lord I’d fought before, then he wouldn’t go down easily.

Without waiting around for a signal to start, I used the speedy Light Magic spell Laser to attack right away. I held back on using Condense to amplify it, since it wouldn’t be much of a surprise attack if I wasted time on multiple spells.

Laser was the high-accuracy spell that had once sliced up the giant monster fish Tobkezerra.

...What?

The laser curved away from the demon lord as if deliberately avoiding him, drilling a hole into the ground and sending up a spray of sand and dust.

Why did it miss?

“Have you forgotten? My Unique Skill Trickster renders any weapons or spells that involve marksmanship quite useless.”

This damn cheater.

I understood Arisa’s feelings a bit better now.

Maybe “Unique Skills” should be renamed as “cheat codes.”

However, I was honestly appreciative that the demon lord still seemed to be under some misunderstanding about my identity, since he went out of his way to explain the nature of his Unique Skill to me.

It was a pretty unfair skill to be sure, but it didn't seem like it would have any effect if I just struck him directly or used area-of-effect magic. The Laser missing surprised me, but it wouldn't matter if I mowed him down with a bigger blast.

"Now, if you'd be so kind as to indulge me... Summon Familiar."

A purple light glinted in the demon lord's eyes, and a huge magic circle appeared before him.

It looked a lot like the one the yellow-skinned demon had used in the old capital, so I waited to see if a whale or something might appear, but nothing happened.

Talk about anticlimactic.

"Something wrong?"

"My apologies. It appears that my familiars, the Flame Lord, the Sky Lord, the Sea Lord, and the Ground Lord have been sealed away."

Oh yeah, Doghead's four generals, huh?

Sorry, but I already defeated them all except the Ground Lord.

"Well, you'll have to settle for something made up on the spot, then..."

With that, the demon lord pulled a tuft of fur from near his ear and blew on it so it scattered in the wind.

"Come to me, familiar."

Each strand of fur turned into a purple dog, and they all attacked me on the spot.

What are you, the Monkey King?!

My AR display labeled the dogs charging at me through the air as **ghost hounds**. They were level 50 and could use some kind of decomposing breath attack.

Since that sounded potentially dangerous, I decided to wipe them all out at

once with the intermediate attack spell Fire Storm. Unlike Forge, it had a nice wide attack range.

“Your strength is ridiculous as ever. One would never expect such power from the lesser spell Fire Circle. Which is exactly what makes you worth fighting.”

Hey, Fire Storm is an intermediate spell!

...Wait, huh?

After automatically making a silent retort, I noticed something a little ominous about the demon lord’s words.

Who in the world would mistake my Fire Storm for the lesser spell Fire Circle?

I could only imagine some kind of demon...

Feeling fed up, I changed my approach from “demon lord extermination” to “information gathering.”

It was best for everyone’s safety, and for the sake of my sightseeing life, to get as much information as I could from this demon lord.

Trying to gather intel on an opponent who I couldn’t afford to hold back against sounded next to impossible, but this guy seemed like the type to blab without too much prompting.

There were two main points I needed to ask him about.

The most important one was these God Fragments.

He had hinted that powerful negative emotions like despair could trigger transformation into a demon lord. Arisa’s emotions tended to have extreme highs and lows, so if there was any way to remove a God Fragment, I’d like to find out.

“Now, on to my next move.”

The demon lord summoned an enormous monster with the body of a lion and the head of an old man, rather strong at level 70. It charged right at me, and I used Dimension Cutter to absentmindedly slice it up.

“Just as I suspected, a manticore is no threat to you...”

The second point was the identity of the person he was mistaking me for.

I had a rough idea already, but it'd be good to know more about their nature, what kind of techniques they used, and so on.

I'd rather avoid fighting them if possible, but I had to be as prepared as possible just in case I needed to protect everyone someday.

"How about this, then?"

This time, twin giants made of flame and tornados attacked me from either side, so I used the spell Implosion to crush them both. Their levels were on the lower side at 60, but they both had high resistances, at least in theory.

"You never cease to exceed my expectations, my lord. That djinn and ifrit were aces in the hole that I stole from the high elves, you know."

The demon lord was rambling about something or other, but it didn't seem that important. I simply ignored him.

Maybe my best approach would be to beat him down and see if I could force him to promise not to lay a hand on the religious folks.

I know the devil can't go back on his word, so I wonder if that applies to demon lords, too?

It'd be nice if we could go from enemies to friends after the battle, like in a *shonen* manga. Maybe he'd even show up when I was in trouble, like, *The only one who gets to defeat you is me!*

"Perhaps I should change my approach, then."

He seemed to have decided that strong individual monsters weren't having any effect, so he summoned hundreds of crimson scorpions into the desert next. Red dots began to fill up my radar.

Surprisingly enough, they were all around the same level as an areamaster or its spawn.

He summoned them in a circle around me. I thought they'd attack with their stingers or something, but instead they started shooting water bullets from their pincers like machine guns.

"They may be mere small fries to you now, but..."

The demon lord's body glowed with purple light.

"...not if I do this. Berserker!"

The size of the water bullets grew bigger, and their rapid-fire speed went up, too.

Some of the scorpions grew larger and redder, and their backs opened up like a submarine launching a ballistic missile, shooting guided fireballs at me like heat-seeking missiles.

I quickly selected Remote Stun from the magic menu.

Target markers appeared in my AR view over the flying fireballs and water bullets, locking onto them in rapid succession.

The targeting was completed in an instant, and I dispatched every one of the projectiles with Remote Stun, then got rid of the scorpions themselves with the Laser and Condense combo.

I fended off the few fireballs that escaped to come toward me with Flexible Shield and my newly learned Flexible Sword.

If he was going to summon so many monsters, I'd prefer giant cows or giant pigs or something.

Couldn't he take a hint from the yellow demon that summoned those whales? Ah, but no minotaurs or anything, please.

Still, I was surprised to see that all his summoning cost only about a third of the demon lord's magic. Did he have a huge amount of MP, like 100,000 or something?

"My goodness... So even monsters summoned with Legion and strengthened with Berserker are still nothing more than goblins to you..."

The demon lord scowled down at the mountain of corpses my magic had created.

I guess he didn't like that I'd arbitrarily beaten them with brute force because I was thinking about other things.

Okay, I better take this more seriously.

“Sorry. I was a little distracted.”

“Apologizing? Now, *that* is unusual. I was under the impression that you didn’t care what anyone thought of you except for little girls.”

Ugh! Another lolicon?!

Come to think of it, Miss Aaze did mention that demons and demon lords had never attacked the elves’ forests before.

Was it seriously because the person in question was a lolicon? I’d assumed they were afraid of the elves’ power.

Oops, no use letting myself get flustered. I had to change the subject to Arisa.

“I was surprised that you gave such friendly advice to the purple-haired girl before.”

“Reincarnations are hardly unusual, but I do pity any young girl who becomes your plaything.”

“If you pity her, you should just take the fragments out of her.”

“What, and kill her? I believe you are already aware that it would be impossible to remove the fragments for one who has only set one foot on the seat of the gods.”

Tch. So they can’t be removed, huh?

I clicked my tongue, disappointed that my guess was wrong. When I spoke to the head priestess of the Tenion Temple about getting rid of a Geis, she had mentioned something about Prayer Magic, so I would have to ask her if that could remove God Fragments.

“Shall we move on to the second round, then? Since you waited for my magic to fully recover, the least I can do is make it worth your while.”

The demon lord twirled his walking stick, transforming it into a polearm around ten feet long. It resembled a glaive, but the spearhead was a blade the size of a broadsword.

I produced a Holy Sword from Storage.

It’d be very inconvenient if the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis broke. In its

place I used a reliable substitute—the Holy Sword Durandal. It didn't cut quite as well as Excalibur, but its excellent balance made it easy to use. Besides, if the blade broke, I could always put it back in the scabbard and use the scripture *<for eternity>* to restore it, so I wasn't as worried about nicking it.

My own handmade Holy Swords were getting closer to the power of God-given Holy Swords thanks to materials like orichalcum and the techniques I learned in the elf village, but I didn't feel comfortable using them against a demon lord quite yet.

“What is going on? Between your earlier antics and now using a Hero's weapon, you're playing around far too much. Do you feel I am unworthy of your beloved Dimension Blade and Nihility Blade?”

Wow, those sound super dangerous.

Whoever the demon lord was mistaking me for, I hoped I never met them. If I had to fight them, I hoped it wouldn't happen for another thousand years—no, that left too much room for error, so maybe after the Big Crunch.

“Then perhaps I should show you a move that will change your mind.”

Eight glowing spheres appeared around the demon lord, each a different color.

My “Sense Danger” skill gave me a warning immediately. It was a similar reaction to when the Hero's companions tried to use an incantation before.

Maybe I should use Break Magic to get rid of them before things grow too dangerous, then?

I scrolled through my magic menu.

“First, the Flame Sword.”

Doghead jabbed the red sphere with his glaive, and the blade melted and reformed into a three-foot-long mass of flame.

Wait, so that's how you use it?

I got so distracted by the unexpected usage that I let my guard down for a second.

Immediately, the demon lord closed in on me.

He was fast—faster even than “Blink.”

His sharp attack seemed to cut through the very air, and I charged Durandal with magic to parry it, activating “Sacredblade.”

In the same moment, my “Sense Danger” skill activated powerfully.

Uh-oh.

Just as I was about to parry, I withdrew my sword and chose to dodge instead.

I still couldn’t completely avoid the flame blade, so I used Flexible Sword and Flexible Shield to block it.

“...They burned up?”

Flexible Sword and Flexible Shield were made up of Practical Magic pseudo-material. I had never seen them catch fire before.

“Ha! I created this blade around the notion of ‘combustion,’ but I never imagined it could burn your Godsdance Armor and Dragonsplitter!”

Apparently, the mystery man used similar techniques to Flexible Shield and my Flexible Sword.

I didn’t like the thought that we shared similar ideas. He might even have finished versions of spells I was still stuck trying to make.

Oops. Better not let my fears get the best of me.

“I’m pleasantly surprised that the Unique Skill Library I stole from the troll demon lord is such an excellent one.”

You can steal Unique Skills from other demon lords?

Based on what he was saying about Arisa, I assumed he had to kill them to do it.

Huh? Wait, why didn’t he try to steal Arisa’s, too, then?

I decided to try asking in the form of a challenge.

“Hmph, a borrowed technique from another demon lord? Why did you not steal from that girl as well, then?”

“I know the limits of my own vessel.”

As the demon lord answered me, the combustion effect on his glaive ran out, so he plunged it into a white sphere instead. According to my AR, this one had the effect **annihilation**.

“The nine Unique Skills I have now are likely the most this body can handle. If I try to acquire any more, no doubt the fragments would consume my very self and degenerate me into a mad demon lord.”

I see. So there's a limit to how many you can learn.

Still, it was pretty amazing that he had nine Unique Skills. The boar lord had three, Arisa had two, and while I'd experienced only one of Zen's firsthand, our conversations gave me the impression he had at least two or three.

Even compared to my four, this guy had way more than I expected.

I decided to block the demon lord's glaive with Flexible Sword and Flexible Shield and try to destroy the other spheres with the Explosion spell.

First, I piled up layers of the Flexible Sword and Shield to try to block the white blade as it came toward me.

Shoot, this isn't working.

The transparent swords and shields vanished as soon as the white light touched them.

Flexible Shield was able to hold up to the black dragon Hei Long's breath attack, at least for a moment, but it didn't even survive that long against this glaive.

At the last second, I changed the target of my Explosion spell to the demon lord and let it loose.

He predicted my move, though, and blocked my spell by creating a black curtain, which my AR labeled **anti-magic**.

Between that and the Anti-Physical Shield he mentioned, wouldn't that make him basically untouchable?

Even the Golden Boar Lord had only a 99 percent resistance to physical

damage and 90 percent to magical damage, so to go beyond that seemed ridiculously broken.

“...Tch.”

I clicked my tongue and thought about my next move.

Hoping he couldn't use both effects at the same time, I produced a shotgun from Storage. The bullets were made the same way as the Holy Arrows that had played such a big role in defeating the boar lord, so I'd call them Holy Buckshot.

Before the smoke cleared from Explosion, I fired the shotgun at the demon lord.

While I was at it, I used the Acceleration Gate spell to speed up the bullet.

The magically charged Holy Buckshot reached the demon lord even faster than the sound.

Small, scalelike shields appeared in front of him to block it, but the Holy Buckshot blasted right through them and sank into the demon lord's body.

A rain of blue bullets followed, punching holes in the demon lord's lower body.

Fortunately, my hunch was correct that he couldn't use anti-magic and Anti-Physical at the same time.

“Impressive...my lord.”

Even as he lost his lower half, the demon lord swung his glowing white glaive down at me.

I used the Holy Sword Durandal to strike its handle and avert the blow, but the part of it that touched the white light vanished.

If he had any way of shooting this light at me, I might've been in a bit of trouble. I was lucky that the effect didn't extend to the whole handle.

I put Durandal away in Storage, since it had lost its tip, and brought out a Holy Sword that I'd made myself out of orichalcum.

The Holy Sword could probably be repaired with its scripture, but I didn't want to leave myself open to attack in the process—I would take care of that

later.

“Heh-heh. How typically eccentric of you to use an antique weapon like a gun!”

Hmm. So Mr. Final Boss is an eccentric weirdo.

I used more Holy Buckshot to take out the rest of the dangerous spheres created with Library.

“But you still haven’t seen the full extent of my powers.”

With his lower half missing, the demon lord floated in midair.

“If I use Legion and Library in combination with Berserker, I can do things like this, you see.”

Three purple lights flashed around the demon lord’s body.

At the same time, the sands of the desert began to form a strangely shaped monster.

Did he use Library to turn the sand into seeds of demons or something?

That seemed unfair, if you ask me.

The sand demons were each around the level of an intermediate demon, and their attack power was boosted 300 percent by berserker mode.

Glittering pieces of glass-like sand floated around them, probably to fend off my Laser attack.

It’d be silly to wait here for them to prepare, and I doubted I could get any materials from the sand demons anyway, so I decided to wipe them all out at once.

I moved up into the air a bit. On the ground, the sand demons threw spears made of swirling sand at me, but I was able to block those with Flexible Shield easily enough.

I lost about one shield every five hits or so; thankfully, their numbers were small.

All right, enough observation.

I produced some seawater from Storage in midair.

Then, with about a hundred school buildings' worth of seawater as the target, I used the Water Magic spell Tidal Wave I'd recently learned from a scroll. The greater Water Magic spell Summon Tidal Wave could be used anywhere, but this intermediate version required a large water source like an ocean or a lake.

Some of it evaporated on touching the hot sand, but an overwhelmingly large amount crashed into the demons.

However, it only seemed to damage them, not destroy them completely.

"Oh-ho, he who rules over magic never ceases to amaze! Using a tidal wave in a desert! I would never conceive of such ideas!"

The demon lord exclaimed in exaggerated surprise and admiration. I kind of felt like I was being mocked.

Next, I used Ice Field on the sand demons submerged under the tidal wave to freeze them, then used Explosion to blow them to bits, ice and all.

I was worried that it wouldn't affect them, since they were sand to begin with, but it seemed to do the trick.

"Ahhh, how refreshing. You'd never know we were in a desert."

His lower half restored, the demon lord smugly took a deep, satisfied breath.

Clearly, the sand demons were just a distraction to buy time for him to regenerate.

I used Fire Storm to evaporate the ice and help set the stage for my next spell.

The steam created a thick cloud in the air. As it swirled and grew darker, lightning flashed within it, creating an atmosphere like the final battle between heaven and hell.

I had just about enough information now, but I figured I'd check once again if he was willing to relent.

"Let me ask one last time. Would you be willing to keep your hands off the temples and their people?"

"Not at all. This may be old news to you, but it's imperative that I destroy all

the temples, kill the priests and priestesses, and steal their believers in order to chip away at the power of the gods. Only after I have broken their illusion of being all-powerful by ridding them of the prayers and believers that grant them power will I be able to fight the gods themselves.”

I wonder if the gods in this world have affairs and cause bizarre incidents like Greek and Norse gods do?

“Why do you hate the gods so deeply?”

“Surely, you don’t need to ask that at this point. The gods see the people of this world only as cattle—no, as *manure*, even—for amplifying their power and helping them climb the ranks.”

The demon lord crossed his arms and drummed his fingers impatiently.

“If any culture that would inconvenience them begins to develop, they’ll start internal or external conflict in order to crush it, or even bring down cruel disasters that make people pray to the very gods that caused them.”

He smiled darkly, a spark of loathing in his eyes.

“They warn the people of coming disasters with oracles, but they do nothing to avert the crises themselves, only look on as the people pray to them for help. And only when their believers have fallen into despair do they deign to reach out a helping hand.”

The demon lord sighed and shook his head.

“It is only natural to wish to destroy such a farce and the incompetent pantheon that performs it, is it not?”

Although I knew I had to take a demon lord’s word with several grains of salt, he did have a point.

If there were Heroes and reincarnations in the past, the culture here probably could have developed more by now.

At the very least, it was unnatural that letterpress printing didn’t exist when paper was so common. And even if they couldn’t produce many airships, there could surely be more blimps, hot-air balloons, and the like, especially with Fire Magic users.

“I will free the people from the yoke of the foolish gods and show them what true freedom—”

As I was thinking it over, the demon lord kept speaking.

But then an unexpected intruder brought our conversation to a close.



“Who dares?!”

The demon lord shouted and unleashed a chant-less Fire Magic spell.

The massive blaze, just as strong as my Fire Storm, disappeared unnaturally when it reached a certain part of the sky.

...A distortion?

The outline of a human figure manifested in the air and began to fill itself in.

Soon, a young girl who seemed to be age five or six appeared.

...No, wait.

This was definitely no ordinary child.

The power I felt emanating from her far eclipsed even that of the demon lord.

As I looked at her, a strange feeling began to ripple through me, but it wasn't fear or awe.

It was joy.

A mysterious sense of delight, like being reunited with a dear old friend.

All my AR display showed next to her was the words **identity unknown**.

I was sure I'd never met her before, yet somehow, her face looked familiar.

“To think you would have the nerve to show yourself before my lord! That's not like you, cowardly Parion!”

Flame Spears the size of utility poles flew forth from the demon lord, but the girl simply waved her hand, and they disappeared.

So this was the goddess Parion, said to be the summoner of Heroes?

“You mustn't listen to the lies of a demon lord, you know.”

Paying no mind to the demon lord's attacks, the little girl looked down at me and smiled.

"Damn you, Parion!"

The demon lord created another explosion sphere, transformed the glaive's blade, and sliced through the little girl, who burned away as if she'd been made of crepe paper.

Huh? Are gods really that weak?

"That's not very polite, my dear Hero. This form is only a temporary trifle, meant to save you from being cajoled by this demon lord."

As she chided me, the girl reappeared.

Was she reading my mind?

"You would call my lord a Hero?"

"Oh, be quiet for a moment."

A painting appeared in the air, and the demon lord was sucked into it and sealed away.

Then I finally remembered where I'd seen her face before.

She was the same little girl who had waved at me from within a painting in the art museum in the old capital.

I'd thought it was just some kind of fantasy-world technique, but it was a real supernatural phenomenon—and a goddess, no less!

"Looks like you've finally remembered."

Wait. If she greeted me then, did that mean she knows that I'm really Nanashi?

"Of course. I've been by your side this entire time, after all."

Wow, so this goddess is stalking me?

"How rude. At least call me a guardian angel or spirit guide or something."

Stop conversing with my inner monologue, please.

Oh, more importantly, I had a question to ask.

“Goddess, is it true that you’ve been suppressing the culture of this world, as the demon lord says?”

“Well, I, for one, have no interest in the activities of humans. You are always the only subject I’m interested in.”

I felt like she was trying to distract me. I attempted to press the subject.

“So you haven’t been controlling people’s minds to prevent them from propagating printing, hot-air balloons, and things like that?”

“Well, apparently, at least one of the gods did that. But why would someone want to prevent printing? Think back. What was the best-selling book of all time on Earth?”

The best-selling book... Ah, right.

Then why would a god want to prevent that?

“And have you been causing disasters, collecting worshippers on false pretenses, and things like that?”

“Not me, no, but it seems like some of the other gods have. They had trouble moderating natural disasters, so eventually they started sending their followers to war against one another, giving them floating islands to try and indirectly control the world, and so on, just for fun.”

She shrugged her tiny shoulders, as if none of this was her problem.

That did sound like something gods would do, but... For all that she’d dismissed the demon lord’s talk as nonsense, wasn’t she now confirming what he’d said?

“But that’s all become rarer since the evil god created the ‘demon lord’ system. Now that the evil god sends demon lords and demons to cause the proper amount of trouble, the gods don’t need to do anything themselves. They just lounge around comfortably and bask in the worship that comes flooding in.”

This didn’t seem right.

The young Goddess Parion who I’d read about in children’s books had gone around persuading kings to help people who were afraid of demons and demon

lords, pleaded with the dragon god to learn the magic of Hero Summoning, and so on.

Her disinterest in the plights of humans, and strength to easily seal a demon lord, was a far cry from the legends I had learned about.

Maybe it was normal for there to be such a gap between expectation and reality, but the difference still really bothered me.

“Listen, my dear Hero. You just keep on being yourself, all right? Be strong enough that you can stand by my side.”

With that, she disappeared as if melting into the air.

> Title Acquired: Darling of the Goddess



“Graaah!”

The Dogheaded Demon Lord tore through the floating painting back into this dimension.

“You deceived me, you watchdog of the gods!”

“I didn’t really do anything. You’re the one who got the wrong idea.”

The demon lord was looking tattered after his ordeal in the painting, his gentlemanly composure gone.

He’d even gone from a five-foot-nine humanoid to a fifteen-foot-tall werewolf-like creature, as if he’d evolved in there.

From the way he was baring his fangs, he looked like he might jump me at any moment.

“Hey, demon lord.”

“Enough! Silence, watchdog!”

The demon lord yowled and unleashed a decomposing breath attack.

I blocked the lethal breath with Flexible Shield, but it barely lasted long enough for me to escape out of range with “Flashrunning.”

I really needed to learn the “Chant” skill so I could use greater magic, or I

wouldn't be able to block truly powerful attacks like these ones.

"Do you know what the biggest best-seller on Earth was?"

"Hmph. The Bible, correct? Or was it *Quotations from Chairman Mao* or the Koran, perhaps?"

I was surprised to find that the demon lord had an answer to my question.

He was right: Holy texts and other such books meant to spread ideas benefited most from the printing press.

The demon lord raised his claws like blades and imbued them with the annihilation effect from Library.

"Right. So then..."

I kept dodging the demon lord's furious attacks, looking into his crazed and hateful eyes as I spoke.

"...Why don't the gods here have the same amount of power as on Earth?"

"What do you—?"

The demon lord started to object, then trailed off mid-sentence. He must have realized what I was trying to say.

It was simple: If the gods' goal was really to amass more followers, there ought to be more widespread religious nations and provinces.

Both the Shiga Kingdom and the Saga Empire had freedom of religion, probably influenced by all the Japanese reincarnations who had helped shape those lands.

In a world where gods clearly existed, it would make sense for whole countries to be backed by a particular god.

But as far as I knew, there weren't any such religious lands except for the Parion Province, the Garleon Alliance, and the Tenion Republic. While all of them were important areas, they could hardly be called major powers.

If a country had a god supporting it, it wouldn't be surprising for it to become a large, powerful nation, like the Lalakie dynasty that had once ruled the world.

At the very least, with a goddess who could easily seal a demon lord into a

picture, it'd be simple enough to invade the Shiga Kingdom.

Getting back to the main point, it seemed to me that the gods would have no reason to want to prevent printing from being developed, since that would help spread religious materials on a large scale.

If anyone had cause to prevent that, it would be...

"So you're saying that my lord is the one who's been preventing culture from evolving?!"

"Yes, or maybe some other third party. But it makes more sense for someone who opposes the gods to prevent those advances from spreading, doesn't it?"

"Unbelievable..."

Looks like he might be willing to listen to reason after all.

"Then the enemy I should really be fighting is..."

But as the demon lord spoke, purple light flooded out of his body and formed a dark-purple collar around the neck of his doglike head.

"What is the meaning of this?!"

The demon lord tried to grab the collar, but his hand went straight through.

It seemed to be made of the same substance as the God Fragments. Even with Library's annihilation effect on his claws, the demon lord couldn't damage it.

"It's all coming back to me... Now I remember! I am his—"

As the demon lord started to shout, chains shot out from the collar and bound him hand and foot.

"Graaaaaah!"

Once the chains rendered him immobile, they began to crackle with purple lightning.

In my AR display, the demon lord's health gauge went down rapidly.

Had the man behind the curtain been controlling him all along?

"Then WHAT have I been doing all THIS time? ...Have these long YEARS of

WAR been a mistAKE?!”

The demon lord howled through the torment of the chains and lightning.

Maybe it was my imagination, but his pronunciation seemed to be getting a little strange.

I remembered that before we started fighting, he mentioned that he’d been killed by this “evil god” or whoever on many occasions.

“GRRR, WHY did I slaughter those CRYING priestesses with MY own hands? What was the PURPOSE of SLAYING those naive peasants WHO refused to give up THEIR faith? WHYYYY?”

The demon lord wept tears of blood as he shouted in despair.

“I... I just WANTED to give freedom TO THE people who were SUFFERING in misery... Rhea...”

Dark-violet light flooded from the demon lord’s eyes and mouth, and his skin began to bubble.

Is it me, or does this look pretty bad?

He must be starting to turn into a mad demon lord because of the powerful emotions from realizing a terrible truth.

I had to get him back to his senses.

“Calm down, demon lord!”

Oh, geez. That’s not going to help.

I guess I’m freaking out a little bit, too.

“I am perfectly CALM. For I AM the original DEMON lord, who IS ALWAYS cool and COLLECTED!”

As he shouted, he started to grow larger and began to change from his werewolf-like form into a giant four-legged beast.

Wzzzaooooohyn.

Looking up at the moon in the afternoon sky, he howled with hatred and madness.

Just hearing it was enough to make me feel unsettled, too.

“Calm down! Don’t lose your head!”

I called out to him repeatedly, but he didn’t respond.

My words weren’t getting through to him anymore.

Then I guess I have no choice.

I’ll have to beat him up to bring him back to his right mind.

I used “Flashrunning” to attack him with Explosion from all directions, mixing in a few Holy Buckshot for good measure.

The ground below us was getting pretty messed up, but it was just sand, so the wind would probably blow it back to normal eventually.

On top of all that, I summoned 128 lightning bolts from the dark clouds using Call Thunder.

> Title Acquired: Violent Destroyer

> Title Acquired: Flash Archer

> Title Acquired: Dark Storm User

> Title Acquired: Tempest Conjurer

I got a bunch of nerdy fantasy-sounding names, but I didn’t have time to worry about those right now.

The demon lord seemed to see the Holy Buckshot as more of a threat than the magic; he used Anti-Physical to block the former, evidently counting on his scalelike shields and countless spawn to deal with the latter.

Even as he was on the verge of losing his sanity and becoming a mad demon lord, he seemed to be able to fight on pure instinct.

Wzzzaooooohyn.

As the demon lord howled, he shot out a blast of silver air.

The breath attack appeared to have the ice attribute attached, as it froze all the rocks and sand dunes around it. Then the newly frozen objects broke and fell apart in the wind.

This attack must be near absolute-zero temperatures.

“Oops, that was close.”

I dodged it with “Flashrunning,” but it gave me the shivers that he could launch a scary attack like that without any prior warning.

Awoooooownnnn.

The demon lord’s spawn attacked me with Magic Swords, but they were easy to avoid, since they weren’t the demon lord himself. Even if their swords had the annihilation effect from Library, it didn’t matter if they couldn’t hit me.

“Burn.”

Just like at the start of the fight, I used Fire Storm to burn the spawn away.

This time, though, no matter how many of them I burned or blew up, the demon lord kept bringing more with Legion and Summon Familiar. The only time I wanted unlimited refills like this was at a *wanko soba* restaurant, thanks.

“Eat this.”

I rained down Holy Buckshot overcharged with magic, hidden among the smoke and flames.

My attempts to knock some sense back into the demon lord went on for a while, but they weren’t yielding the desired results.

“Oh, shoot...”

I created 120 Acceleration Gates to speed up the Holy Buckshot, but it made them too powerful, and they tore through the demon lord’s body like a rain of blue lasers, evaporating him.

“Did I overdo it?”

I scratched my head.

But then I saw a purple shadow welling up from the blood on the sand, and the demon lord came back in his four-legged-beast form.

“Geh, leave it to a demon lord...”

I guess defeating him once wasn’t enough, just like with the Golden Boar Lord

I'd faced off against before. Demon lords really didn't go down by ordinary means.

"HA-HA... BWAH-HA-HA-HA-HA... This WORLD is BETTER OFF destroyed."

Oh, he can talk again.

Maybe beating him up was working after all.

"GODS and PEOPLE and DEMONS and EVERYTHING... All SHALL BE EQUAL in death! Fenrir!"

Wait a second, demon lord, could you hold off on the dramatic self-destruction, please? Besides, I thought you were a dog, not a wolf.

"...What the?"

A dark-purple dome of light began to spread outward from the demon lord.

It swallowed him up in an instant and continued to slowly expand across the desert and the sky, while the wind began blowing toward it.

Looking closely, the sand and rocks appeared to be vanishing when they touched the dome, like sugar dissolving in water.

"Wait, seriously?"

I produced an iron spear from Storage and tossed it at the dome, but it evaporated starting from the spot where it touched the dome.

"Well, I'll be damned..."

Anything that touched the dome was actually getting destroyed, not just disappearing from sight.

If this was similar to the annihilation effect from the Unique Skill Library, it might be difficult to counteract.

The wind that had started blowing was probably caused by the drop in atmospheric pressure as the air that touched the dome evaporated, too.

"This could be a bit of a problem."

If left alone, this might actually manage to swallow up the whole world, exactly like he said.

The dome was moving slowly, but it was destroying the desert in a globe-like shape.

Wzzzaooooohyn.

The demon lord howled to the heavens inside the semitransparent globe.

Following his gaze upward, I saw the white full moon in the afternoon sky. Was he actually howling at the moon?

“All right, I can’t just stand around and watch. Let’s see what I can do about this.”

Muttering to myself, I opened my magic menu to search for a proper spell.

First I tried using Break Magic, but the spell itself evaporated on contact, so maybe this wasn’t exactly magic at all.

Next I tried Mana Drain to steal the MP from the dome, but sure enough, the MP evaporated, too.

Holy Buckshot and the concentrated Laser were absorbed into the dome with no effect.

A Holy Sword might put up more resistance, but going by the length of the blade, my body might get broken up before I could break through.

“I’m not looking to do a suicide attack here, so now what...?”

I squinted at the demon lord, who had activated Fenrir.

The semitransparent dome around him didn’t seem to move at a uniform speed; instead, it moved whenever the purple waves radiating from the demon lord reached the edge of the dome.

...Hmm?

Whenever the dome absorbed big boulders, the speed of its expansion slowed down.

“I guess it’s worth a try...”

I threw tons of rubble and seawater at the dome from Storage, and it slowed the expansion rate even further.

When it was hit with enough material at once, the dome's destruction of physical mass couldn't keep up, and it would temporarily contract.

"Maybe this will work, then?"

I double-checked to make sure there was no one on the map.

Sure enough, there weren't any other people near the area, probably because of the torrential chaos we'd been causing for a while now. There were some monsters like scarab beetles and sand scorpions, but that wasn't a big deal as long as no humanoid casualties were involved.

"First, let's try to minimize the peripheral damage..."

I took out the City Core terminal from Storage, confirmed that I could execute my plan, and put it into action.

"Okay, and now..."

I opened my magic menu and selected a spell that I normally kept locked.

With the preparations in place, I looked back at the despairing outline of the demon lord who sought destruction.

"...Checkmate. I hope you can live your next life peacefully."

I spoke, knowing full well that my words wouldn't reach him, then unleashed the spell I'd selected.

Now that I'd put an end to everything, I used Return to teleport back to the border of the great desert.

"Wow, you can still see it from here..."

Even from such a great distance, the purple dome the demon lord had created was still faintly visible.

Using the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance, I saw that the dome had already expanded to a radius of over half a mile.

At this rate, things would play out exactly as the demon lord wanted.

But...

That *wasn't* going to happen.

I looked up at the sky.

And before long, it descended.

Tearing through the clouds.

Leaving a trail of light behind it.

The asteroid came crashing down with a roar.

Meteor Shower—the ultimate spell that had destroyed the Valley of Dragons and killed the powerful dragon god.

Far in the distance, the huge meteorite crashed into the violet dome.

But even after absorbing such a gigantic object, the dome didn't disappear.

Yeah, that's what I expected.

More meteors came raining down toward the dome.

Whether they broke or dissolved, they just kept coming.

A total of nearly one thousand meteors crashed down onto the desert, until finally the purple light vanished into the bottom of the crater.

> Title Acquired: Demon Lord Slayer: Dogheaded Demon Lord

> Title Acquired: Earth-Rending Conjurer

> Title Acquired: Sky-Falling Conjurer

“...Whew, I'm glad that worked.”

Even the purple dome that destroyed everything it touched couldn't hold up against such a barrage of huge meteors, and eventually the demon lord hidden inside it was exposed as well.

In the corner of my eye, my log was filling up at a frantic pace.

I must have destroyed all the enemies on the map and met the conditions for automatic loot recovery.

Deciding to look through the log later, I gazed up at the gold-tinged sky.

Fortunately, there was no fear of the sand that was kicked up by the meteor shower having negative effects on other areas. I'd used the City Cores under my

control to put up a barrier that would keep the sandstorm within the desert.

The great desert was much larger than the handful of City Cores could control, so it was possible that a little sand would leak out, but I doubted that small amount would be too much of a problem for the other nations to deal with.

It'd certainly be better than a demon lord destroying everything.





“We lost?”

“That guy always gets in the way.”

“How mean!”

“Awww, I’m mad.”

“Weird, I feel dizzy.”

“Dizzy!”

“Woozy...”

“I’m gonna faint...”

“Can we go home? Let’s go home...”

I’m not letting you leave.

I made swift work of the purple lights that had appeared in the Meteor Shower crater—the God Fragments—by slashing them with a divine sword clad in a black aura.

This time, I watched the broken light pieces carefully and saw that they were sucked into the sword. Maybe it had some kind of sealing ability?

As I was thinking about it, the sword’s black aura wriggled like a living creature and started sucking up my magic power, so I quickly put it back in Storage.

I had to figure out a solution for this black aura, or I wouldn’t be able to have long battles with the divine sword.

Still...

Who would have guessed that those seemingly nefarious God Fragments were actually some kind of trap that resided in people’s bodies, giving them Unique Skills as bait only to eventually turn them into demon lords?

Either that or they didn’t actually hold any ill will at all, and the huge power just broke down its host and turned them into a demon lord on its own.

Regardless, using them lightly looked like a sure path to self-destruction.

I would have to order Arisa not to use her Unique Skills again, no matter what.

“...Hmm?”

A single child suddenly appeared before me.

His presence was indicated by a white light on my radar, and my AR displayed his name as **Crow**.

That name sounds familiar.

It was the same purple-haired dogfolk child who had appeared at the explorers' guild.

Although, in fact, the hands that were visible beneath his tattered poncho looked human. So he wasn't a dogfolk person—he just had a dog head.

What could that mean...?

“...You...”

Crow looked up at me.

On closer inspection, I could see the sand through his body.

Come to think of it, the explorers' guild clerk had mentioned that he disappeared like a ghost.

“Thank...you.”

The young boy spoke in a muffled, staticky voice.

He seemed to be speaking Hallowed Language.

“The rest is up to you...”

With that cryptic statement, the boy named Crow disappeared as if his body had dissolved in the desert wind.

Based on what he had said, maybe he was the original form of the Dogheaded Demon Lord.

In fact, the purple-haired silhouette that I'd spotted in the mirage city might have been Crow's soul, wandering around before he was revived as a demon lord.

If that was the case, the lack of miasma in Labyrinth City and its strange movements when we defeated the areamaster could have been omens of the demon lord's revival, too.

Not that figuring this out now did me any good.

"Still... I wish he wouldn't tell me so calmly that the rest is up to me."

I guess I was under no obligation to take up whatever duty he was trying to bequeath to me.

Since he was a demon lord, he'd probably get revived on his own eventually.

It would have been nice if he passed on peacefully, but I doubt a demon lord would do anything so admirable.

It seemed like he'd returned to his senses now that the God Fragments had left him, so he could clean up after his own affairs.

As for me, I'd disposed of the demon lord and gathered most of the information I needed.

All that was left was to deal with this "man behind the curtain" character the demon lord had mentioned, who sort of seemed to be a higher-tier version of me...

To be honest, I didn't want anything to do with him if possible. But if this were a game, defeating Doghead would definitely trigger some kind of final-boss event to start.

This world wasn't really a game; it just had gamelike aspects, but it would probably still be wise to make preparations in case this enemy appeared eventually.

I could likely beat almost anyone with enough Meteor Showers, since that strategy had defeated even the strongest deity of all: the dragon god. But that would probably make me an enemy of the rest of the world. Besides, my other ace in the hole, the divine sword, wasn't suited to lengthy battles.

Most likely, I had to develop some kind of spell or weapon that would do powerful damage to an individual.

But I didn't have to do that right away.

For now, I had to get back to the others, since they were probably worried about me.

Perhaps they had even defeated the floormaster by now.

Just to be safe, I made sure that the remains of the meteors had been placed in my Storage as part of the loot auto-recovery before I went back to the labyrinth.

Floormaster Showdown

Arisa here. What kind of crappy game would have the last boss show up when you're trying to fight a mid-boss, huh? I'd like to give the god who determines our fate a piece of my mind! Difficulty curves are very important, you know!

"A...d-demon lord..."

Level 140?

Wait. A demon lord with a dog's head?

No way.

This guy is no ordinary demon lord.

It's the one from the legends.

The devil who burned temples around the world and devoured all the envoys of the gods who walked the earth.

The servant of the evil god who fought the gods' army and defeated dragons.

What in the world is he doing here?

Is he here because of *me*?

In my homeland, this violet hair of mine was said to be a cursed color that summoned misfortune.

Did the demon lord appear here because of my unlucky hair and me?

If it wasn't for me...

My mind starts to spiral into a negative loop, but then master gently pulls me close.

"Arisa, it's all right."

Master reassures me in a quiet voice, without even a speck of fear.

“...Okay.”

I manage to mumble an answer.

Of course! This is no time to be freaking out!

I have to protect master and the others!

I'll use my Unique Skills Never Give Up and Over Boost to blast this guy into the next dimension.

If it doesn't work the first time, I'll do it as many times as it takes.

The god who gave me these powers said that the restricted number of uses is a limiter for the soul.

Fine, then—use up my entire soul. I would've liked to get cozy with master some more, but it's a small price to pay to save the people I love.

This hasn't been such a bad life. If I died now, I'd be happy.

If possible, I hope I can be reincarnated by my optimistic master's side again in my next life.

Taking a deep breath, I activate my—Huh?

Suddenly, the view in front of me changes. Master must have used “Warp.”

In an instant, I find myself next to Nana and the others.

That reckless master of mine is planning to fight the demon lord alone.



“W-we have to find him!”

I try to use my Space Magic to locate master, who teleported away with the demon lord, but he's nowhere to be found.

No way. Usually I can find people I know well easily!

“Arisa, it's the floormaster. We ought to retreat to the rear for now.”

Miss Liza directs everyone to withdraw to a safe area.

She scoops me up under her arm and carries me away like luggage, but I have no time to complain about this uncouth treatment.

I use Over Boost just once to search for him, but I still find nothing.

It's as if the very concept of Satou has vanished from this world entirely.

"It's no use... I can't find him."

I grind my teeth in frustration at my own uselessness.

"What was thaaat?"

"It was scary like a demon, sir!"

"No. Demon lord."

"Really?!"

"Are you sure, Mia?"

Mia clearly understood, too.

"No point worryiiiiing?"

"But I am worried, sir!"

Tama seems to be the only one who's not worried.

How can she have such complete faith in him?

Lulu has turned pale, and even Liza and Nana started pacing around when they learned it was a demon lord.

"Honestly, is Tama the only calm one? Deep breaths!"

The elf teachers come over and scold us.

"Inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale..."

I can't quite inhale properly, and I end up choking and coughing instead.

Still, I think I'm a little calmer now.

"Damn it, Nana, I told you that the tank must always remain calm."

"I am terribly sorry, I apologize. I experienced distress because I could not aid master in his time of need, I reflect."

"Really! You know Satou's not the type to choose an honorable death against an enemy he can't defeat, right? If he thought he was going to lose, he'd run away without hesitation. He either left you here because he thinks you're not

ready to fight a demon lord yet or because he knows he can win easily without your help, I'd bet."

Ugh, it doesn't make sense. My feelings are starting to catch up to me again!

"He told us not to say anything, but I think you lot can handle the truth. Satou defeated a giant jellyfish monster with five-digit stats in the blink of an eye in space, okay? After seeing something that ridiculous, I know for a fact that it'd be foolish to worry about that man's safety."

Five-digit stats?

That's what he called *pest extermination*...?

As I listen anxiously to the teachers, the earth shakes intermittently with earthquakes around magnitude three.

"Wobblyyy?"

"It's shaky, sir!"

"Eek! W-will we be all right?"

"The labyrinth is sturdy. A tremor of this size will not damage it, I declare."

"Could this be from master fighting the demon lord?"

If he's out of range of my Space Magic, nothing short of a hail of giant meteors would cause the ground to shake like this from so far away.

The meteor shower I saw before I arrived in Seiryuu City comes to mind, but surely even master isn't that ridiculously overpowered.

"I don't think it's an earthquake. There was a dormant volcano near the border of the great desert, so maybe it erupted or something."

This earthquake sure is lasting a while, though.

I shudder to think what's happening at the epicenter.



"I'm back. Sorry to worry you all."

Naturally, he shows up acting as if he'd only popped out to do some shopping.

"Welcome baaack!"

“Welcome back, sir!”

““Master!””

“Satou.”

“Master, I celebrate your safe return.”

As everyone surrounds him, master’s smile is so ordinary that I hesitate for a moment.

I ask what happened with the demon lord, and he simply replies, “I beat him.”

You beat him? Really, just like that?

I mean, there’s not even a scratch on his clothes, never mind on him.

That was a storied villain of legend, you know?

Demon lords are supposed to be exceptionally, off-the-charts strong...

“Ooh, so that’s the floormaster?”

Master looks around and spots the floormaster standing calmly in the middle of the Room of Trials.

The monster, which appeared shortly after master left, is a thunder squid emperor, covered in red lightning.

It’s over 150 feet tall, with tentacles as long as its body writhing around on the ground.

“What do you want to do? Fight it some other day?”

Master looks at us with concern.

Considering how emotionally exhausted we all are from worrying about him, maybe it would be best to postpone our encounter.

But as I look at master, still perfectly calm after fighting the strongest demon lord ever, I can’t bring myself to give up.

If I want to stand by his side someday, I have to be able to overcome obstacles like this without a problem.

“We’ll do it now! You’re all still good to go, right?”

Everyone else nods, to my relief.

Declaring our intentions to master as he casually gazes at the floormaster, I gather everyone around to give them the rundown on the enemy.

“This thing is called a ‘thunder squid emperor.’ It’s level fifty-nine—a little higher than expected but nothing we can’t handle.”

The others nod meekly.

Even Tama and Pochi, who are obviously thinking about food, since it’s a squid, listen obediently with locked-lips poses.

“Its special attacks are Water Magic and lightning. They’re both dangerous, but the biggest thing to watch out for is those eyes. It’s got a hypnotic-evil-eye move, so we’d better crush it as quickly as possible.”

Fortunately, we’ve got experience fighting a powerful enemy with lightning before, an areamaster called the “lightning elder stag.”

Since this one has Water Magic, too, we’ll have to avoid getting wet in case we’re electrocuted.

“Lulu, can you do it?”

“Y-yes! I’ll do my best.”

Miss Liza appoints Lulu to destroy the eyes, which I think is a good call.

“But out of all the opponents I imagined, this is one of the easier cases. We’re lucky it’s not like the ice ivy emperor Jelil’s group fought in the Middle Stratum, with some special ability like being immune to physical attacks.”

“Yes, if the vanguard’s attacks are effective, I believe we can use the strategy we discussed yesterday.”

I nod at Liza and explain the battle plan and important points to look out for. Then Mia and I cast support magic on everyone, and I activate the Space Magic spell Tactical Talk so we can communicate during the battle.

“All right, we’re ready.”

At that, our overprotective master uses the Practical Magic spell Mana Transfer to recharge Mia’s and my magic.

As always, he has a ridiculous amount of MP.

He just fought the strongest demon lord in history, but he still has that much magic to spare?

“Thank you, master.”

But I can’t let him be the one protecting us forever.

We’ll prove that we’re top-class explorers, too!

Miss Liza reports in with Tactical Talk.

“Arisa, we’re all in position.”

“Okey-dokey.”

Before we engage in battle, I check on the thunder squid emperor once again.

In the time it took for us to get in position, the floormaster has surrounded itself with pink cotton candy–like clouds. They’re letting off a crackling noise, so they must be electrically charged.

If we challenge it at close range, we could easily die of electrocution.

I guess even the Upper Stratum floormaster is nothing to sneeze at.

Tama, Pochi, and Liza, who have scattered in three directions, are waving at me. Honestly, what if the floormaster sees them?

“Mia, start getting your sand giant ready.”

“Mm.”

As Mia begins her chant next to me, I bring a bunch of sand out of my Space Magic Garage onto the floor.

Mia uses her Spirit Magic to create a sand giant pseudo-spirit.

She can do it without sand, but it requires less magic power if the materials are available.

The sand giant is stronger against impact and lightning than a green giant, so I think it’ll be a good shield for our opening moves.

Reacting to Mia’s magic, the thunder squid emperor starts moving.

“Miss Liza, get your team ready, too.”

“Understood.”

Liza charges her Dragon Claw Spear with magic, and the rest of the vanguard charges their orichalcum-alloy Holy Swords with magic, too.

The blue used to make Holy Swords seems to filter the magic somehow: All of their swords glow blue, and the “Spellblade” that appears is glowing bluish-white like master’s “Sacredblade.”

So maybe master’s “Sacredblade” skill is a substitute for the blue’s filter function.

“Let’s go.”

Miss Liza, who’s been on standby on the other side of the large room, fires a ridiculously huge Spellblade Shot at the back of the thunder squid emperor’s head.

The squid monster starts discharging lightning more violently and switches its target from Mia to Liza.

Okay, I know that’s what we planned, but Liza is going a little too hard right now.

“Nana, it’s a bit early, but jump in, please.”

“Understood, I respond.”

Nana, who’s on guard in the front, steps onto the battlefield.

It’s too soon to use “Taunt” yet.

“Javelins engage, I declare.”

Nana creates five javelins with her Foundation ability and strikes the floormaster with them, shifting the target over to her.

Tama and Pochi attack from either side with Spellblade Shots, too. Unlike Liza, they’re using a normal amount of power.

Exactly as they should!

Our plan to keep the floormaster confused by alternating attacks among the

four seems to be working well so far.

I used to do the same kind of aggro ping-pong in MMO raid battles all the time.

“...■■■■■ **Create Sand Giant** *Suna Shouryou Souzou.*”

Next to me, Mia finishes her Spirit Magic chant.

The mountain of sand transforms into a giant, which lumbers toward the thunder squid emperor.

It absorbs the floating lightning clouds that surround the monster as it goes, looking totally nonplussed (or at least it would if sand giants had faces).

Ikwaawwh.

Once the giant reaches a certain distance, the thunder squid emperor raises its tentacles in a menacing pose, emitting a low-pitch roar.

Lightning flashes among its tentacles, and thunder rumbles painfully loudly as it strikes the sand giant with a lightning attack.

Ouch, my ears.

I covered my eyes with my hand, but my ears are ringing like crazy.

I’ll have to ask master to add something to our armor that blocks out sounds above a certain noise level.

Even after taking that powerful lightning strike, the sand giant just keeps walking toward the floormaster.

Still, it looks like it’s lost almost a third of its health. If it weren’t a lightning-resistant pseudo-spirit, that attack might’ve brought it down.

“My eeeyes! Sir.”

Oh dear. Pochi is squatting down and clutching her face. She must’ve looked straight at it.

The others don’t seem to be as severely affected, but their eyes and ears are probably still temporarily shot, so I’d better start stalling.

“Everyone, calm down! I’ll buy some time. For now, stay away from the squid

until your vision recovers!”

At that, the group all puts some distance between themselves and the monster.

“Mia, you all right?”

Mia doesn't seem to hear me directly, but the Tactical Talk gets through to her, so she nods. I guess she's fine, then.

“Have the sand giant attack and pin down the squid.”

“Mm.”

On Mia's orders, the sand giant grabs the floormaster.

The squid monster resists, striking at the giant with its tentacles, but its blows sink through the sand without having much effect.

Realizing its attacks aren't working, the desperate thunder squid emperor spits out a cloud of poison fog like a squid would use ink, but the sand giant doesn't breathe or even physically see, so it has no effect.

All right, looks like this is an even better matchup than I expected.

“Let's crush its hypnotizing eyes while we have the chance.” I look up at Lulu. *“Can you shoot them out?”*

“I should be able to manage one...”

“Okay, I'll take care of the other one with magic, then.”

By my side, Lulu prepares her laser gun.

My long-distance shooting isn't great, so I decide to use Fire Ball Chaser, a spell with a homing mechanism.

Shoot. The squid's resisting my magic; I didn't deal any damage.

Lulu's laser gun hits the other eye, but it bounces off the protective film, so it doesn't do much damage besides dazzling the squid a little.

“Lulu, could you shoot the squid's eyes with your physical rifle or the Acceleration Gun?”

“Not right now.”

Lulu points at the thunder squid emperor, which is now guarding its eyes with tentacles.

I guess it really didn't like that laser gun attack.

"Well, that's a problem. I guess we'll have to get close enough to shoot..."

"Pochi can do it, sir!"

"Tama toooo?"

Since the Tactical Talk spell is still connected, Tama's and Pochi's cheerful voices come through.

...Wait. Pochi?

"Pochi, are your eyes okay?"

"Yeah, I just splashed a potion on my face, sir!"

I don't think that's how potions normally work...but whatever.

"You think you've got this?"

"Leave it to us, sir!"

"Aye-aye?"

Hmm, I'm a little worried that the floormaster's aggro target might shift from the sand giant to Pochi or Tama if they cause too much damage.

But our top priority is crushing the hypnosis eyes, and it doesn't seem to be able to produce those electric clouds while it's tangling with the sand giant, so I guess it should be fine.

A woman's got to have guts, after all!

"Okay, please do, then."

"You got it!"

"Sir!"

Tama and Pochi strike dramatic poses, then start charging up their Holy Swords.

Their blades both glow blue, with particles of light floating around them.

Oh, good. Looks like Pochi succeeded at controlling hers this time.

“Strawberryyy?”

“I’ve been saving the jerky flavor, sir!”

The two of them pull out magic-recovery potions from the potion holders on their belts and drink them down.

A beef jerky–flavored magic potion? Ew.

Just as the thunder squid emperor pauses its seemingly endless lightning blasts, Pochi and Tama attack.

Pochi dodges a tentacle with “Blink,” quickly approaching its head. Then she slashes with her lengthened Holy Sword, stabbing right into one of the floormaster’s eyes, which it quickly closes in pain.

“Not done yet, sir!”

Whoa! She used a Spellblade Shot while her blade was still stuck into the eye and blew it up... That’s a pretty nasty move to pull with such a cute face.

“Whip sword driiill!”

Closing in on the other side, Tama lashes out with her whip sword coated in “Spellblade,” stabbing the thunder squid emperor’s other eye.

Then she shortens the blade, pulling herself up in the process. I’m surprised the sword doesn’t pop out, until I remember it can produce spikes from the tip. I guess Tama plays dirty, too.

As she gets closer, Tama lashes out with the drill-shaped orichalcum-alloy Holy Sword in her other hand.

I’m impressed she can use such a ridiculous weapon.

Uh-oh, looks like an area-of-effect attack is coming.

“Nana!”

“Giant squid! If you think yourself so impressive, you should light up like a firefly squid, I challenge!”

Ahhh, I don’t know if that’s the “Taunt” I would’ve chosen...

The thunder squid emperor lights up with electricity, and a bolt of lightning strong enough to bring down a bull elephant streaks toward Nana.

“Oh!”

Lulu catches her breath.

Layers and layers of Magic Shields and barriers surround Nana, protecting her from harm.

It’s only the second time I’ve seen this ability, but that defensive power is still crazy.



“Looks like the squid’s getting low on health.”

Nana and the others have all taken a few hits by now, but thanks to our overpowered armor and excessive potions provided by master, our battle lines have stayed strong.

“Indeed, Arisa. It may be time to finish it off.”

When we’ve worn it down about halfway, Miss Liza decides it’s time to go on the offensive.

“Nana, Tama, Pochi, let’s link up.”

“Understood.”

“Aye-aye!”

“Roger, sir!”

Ooh, a combo attack!

“Form zero, Blast Armor, I declare.”

Nana’s golden Holy Sword glows blue and strikes the thunder squid emperor’s defensive barrier.

For a second, it looks like the barrier will hold, but then Nana’s sword flashes, breaking through the barrier completely.

That special move was developed specifically to bust through defensive barriers, after all.

“Form one? Vorpal Fang!”

The Holy Swords Tama holds in each hand produce a single giant fang-like blade.

Tama spins like a top as she attacks, slicing into the defenseless thunder squid emperor and leaving bite mark–like wounds.

The floormaster flails its tentacles at her furiously.

“Easyyy?”

As the tentacles roar through the air, Tama dodges them smoothly.

I wish she wouldn’t show off her acrobatics by avoiding them by a paper-thin margin, though! Leave that sort of thing to masked assassins. Also, you’re supposed to say, *Hmph, how foolish*, or something.

“Form two, sir! Vanquish Strike!”

Next, Pochi dives in with “Blink,” her whole body shining blue.

Pochi and her Holy Sword drive right into the thunder squid emperor, its barrier gone and its sturdy hide already riddled with wounds.

It reminds me of the last scene of an old mystery movie I watched long ago.

Buigwaaabbbwh.

Pochi uses the momentum of the thrashing squid to launch herself away from the huge wound.

Now that Tama, Pochi, and Nana have done serious damage to it with their combo attack, Miss Liza charges in with blue light fluttering around her.

There’s “Spellblade” extending from the tip of her Dragon Claw Spear, nearly three times longer than usual.

“Form three. Draco Buster!”

Liza launches a barrage of attacks with her shining spear, then finishes the move by whirling around and using the momentum of the spin to drive in one last strike.

The attack breaks through the subcutaneous fat that had already been

damaged by Pochi's assault, piercing deep into the squid's organs.

Buigwaaaabbbwh.

The thunder squid emperor roars even more loudly.

Meanwhile, Liza bites open the magic-recovery potion she was holding in her mouth and drinks it down.

Her magic quickly recoups from being on the verge of drying out. It's supposed to be an intermediate potion, but its recovery speed is closer to a greater one.

"Finishing move: Spellblade Blaster."

Her spear still piercing the squid's flesh, Liza follows up her attack with another.

I can see blue light shining within the floormaster's body.

In the next instant, blue blades start to shoot out from inside its skin.

Buigwaaaabbbwh.

Its eyes full of flaming wrath, the thunder squid emperor lashes out at Liza with tentacles and lightning all at once.

"I won't let you, I declare."

Using her "Taunt" skill again, Nana jumps in with "Body Strengthening" and "Blink," moving at superhuman speeds to put herself between Miss Liza and the floormaster.

She blocks one of its tentacles with her large shield and the rest of the tentacles and lightning with Floating Magic Shields.

They're all so amazing.

The floormaster's health is nearly down to 30 percent.

If we keep chipping away at it, it's going to go into rampage mode.

So we have to bring it down quickly.

"Arisa, time."

"Okey-dokey."

Mia's sand giant runs out of health and starts to collapse.

I use the Space Magic spell Labyrinth to buy some time. It'll last only about thirty seconds at best, but that should be more than enough.

As Mia chugs a magic-recovery potion beside me, I catch a whiff of peach.

So hers are peach-flavored, huh? We've got him doing all kinds of improvements for us.

Mia uses the remains of the sand giant to create a quicksand snake with Spirit Magic and bind the thunder squid emperor.

The squid writhes around, trying to tear off the snake, but it seems to be even harder to budge than the giant.

"Lulu, get ready."

"Okay."

Lulu, who's been supporting everyone with her rifle and laser gun, switches over to preparing her Acceleration Gun.

I use my Space Magic to help keep the floormaster from moving, too.

But she's not aiming for the monster. If she shoots it directly, it'll resist most damage.

No, she's aiming for the quicksand snake that's wrapped around the thunder squid emperor. I suspend it in the air, indirectly holding the monster in place.

Then I pull out a magic potion from my own holder and drink it down in one go.

Ew.

I used a bitter one because it recovers more MP, but the sweet ones really are easier to drink.

If Lulu's Acceleration Gun hits, it should bring the squid monster down past its last 30 percent.

So before it can go into rampage mode, I'll use my Unique Skill to finish it off in one blow with the greater Space Magic spell Disintegrate.

Lulu pulls her Acceleration Gun out of her Fairy Pack and gets it ready.

She looks to me questioningly. I nod and give her a “go” signal.

“Targeting complete. Hold.”

“Yes, my lady. Dimension Pile on standby.”

The Acceleration Gun’s new support system responds to Lulu’s command.

Yep, I definitely prefer the lilting tones of master’s voice to those beeps and boops.

The invisible Dimension Pile secures the long, heavy barrel of the Acceleration Gun in place.

“Activate virtual barrel.”

“Okay. Virtual barrel, spread.”

A sixty-foot-long Practical Magic pseudo-material barrel appears in front of the Acceleration Gun.

Yesss, so cool!

“Unlock acceleration magic circle.”

“Aye-aye, ma’am. Battery fully charged.”

The magic power cylinder attached to the side of the Acceleration Gun charged with magic to create magic circles.

...Huh?

I thought it had enough for three last time. Why does it look empty now? Even the spare cylinder seems depleted...

“Acceleration, overdrive.”

Magic circles start appearing along the virtual barrel—Wait, how many is it going to make?!

What the heck? I thought there were only three acceleration magic circles.

Isn’t that closer to, like, a hundred?

“Preparations complete! Arisa?”

Lulu looks at me expectantly.

Well, obviously it's go time.

I point at the thunder squid emperor and give the signal.

"FIIIIIRE!"

"Ignition!"

As soon as Lulu's slim finger pulls the trigger, a bullet rockets out.

With an explosive noise that sounds like *BANG* or *BOOM*, a blue light shoots out of Lulu's Acceleration Gun.

Huh? It's real buckshot, right?

Why does it look like a laser?

Whoa, that one shot punched a huge hole right through the floormaster's torso.

The area around the hole caves inward, and the thunder squid emperor's body starts to shrink back.



Then, as if it's been torn into pieces by the solidified sand snake, the squid monster falls apart into neat, round slices.

Geh, it even blasted right through the labyrinth wall behind it!

Then our master speaks up as lightly as always.

"Wow, Mach 20 really is amazing."

Mach *what*?! So that was twenty times the speed of sound?!

You've gotta be kidding me!

But I'm so shocked that I can't even form the words to scold him.

"Well, you said before that a railgun can reach Mach 20, so I thought I'd give it a try."

Okay, I know I said that, but still!

Don't talk about it like you tried a fun new dinner recipe.

No wonder that one shot made the virtual barrel fall apart like it was made of thin ice.

As I stand there feeling exhausted, Tama and Pochi come running up.

"Arisaaa!"

"Victory pose, sir!"

Huh? Wait, that was it?

Seriously? What about my turn, huh?

I didn't even get to use my Unique Skill!

While my mind goes totally blank, Tama and Pochi grab my hands and drag me along.

Then we do a victory pose in front of the huge treasure chest that appeared on the altar where I did the summoning ritual, taking a commemorative photo with master and the rest of the group. We even bring in our teachers to pose with us for a second one.

And thus...

We acquire our mithril badges.

Epilogue

Satou here. Whenever I visited my family in the boonies after getting a job, I was always shocked by how much my young cousins had grown. Children really do grow up so fast.

“Great work, everyone.”

When I called out to my victorious companions, they all came running up to me.

I proudly congratulated them on their defeat of the floormaster.

“Nya-ha-haaa?”

“We did our best, sir!”

There was no trace of the Tama and Pochi who had once trembled fearfully in front of a crowd throwing rocks.

If they came across a situation like that now, I was sure they’d be able to take justice into their own hands.

“I know. I was watching the whole time.”

I patted the pair on their heads as Tama grinned and Pochi’s tail wagged.

Tama rubbed her head into my hand, as if I wasn’t petting her enough.

“Victory.”

Mia held up her small hands in a V sign as Arisa had taught her, so I patted her lightly, too.

“Thanks for taking on such a big task, Mia.”

Instead of using a powerful behemoth, Mia had used a plain but effective sand giant to block the enemy’s attacks and make it easier for the rest of the group to strike.

“Mm.”

Mia nodded, looking satisfied.

“...Liza, your finger is bleeding.”

Liza’s pinkie finger appeared to have been injured during her last special move.

I quickly used Water Magic to heal her wound.

“Thank you very much, master.”

As she thanked me, Liza’s tail was waving back and forth proudly.

I put a hand lightly on her shoulder to avoid making things uncomfortable and praised her efforts. “You’ve gotten really strong.”

Moments like this are rare opportunities to say that sort of thing.

“Y...yes, master... It’s all thanks to you.”

Her voice shook, and I looked over to find that tears were flowing down her cheeks.

For just a second, I thought maybe I had phrased my compliment wrong, but her expression suggested that they were tears of gratitude.

“I always feel safe entrusting the group to you, Liza. Keep up the good work.”

“...Of course. I shall do whatever I can.”

I handed Liza, still crying, a handkerchief.

“Master, praise me, too, I request.”

Nana pushed up close to me next.

She was still wearing her sturdy metal armor, so having her chest pressed against me wasn’t exactly thrilling.

“Nana, you did great protecting everyone.”

“Yes, master.”

Nana was expressionless as always, but the corners of her lips looked to me as if they were faintly upturned.

“Lulu.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Lulu stood anxiously at attention, fiddling nervously with her bangs.

I was a little tempted to tease her by saying, *You’ve gotten very pretty*, but this wasn’t the time for such a childish joke.

“Your speed and accuracy were really amazing.”

If I was speaking to Arisa, I could say something like, *’Grats on the last hit*, but I figured the refined Lulu wouldn’t be particularly pleased by praise like that.

“Thanks for using difficult equipment like the Acceleration Gun so well.”

“No, no, it’s all thanks to you, master!”

Lulu covered her face with her hands modestly.

Maybe I should be complimenting her a little more often to help her get used to it.

“Arisa...”

Arisa turned to me, looking dissatisfied.

Seeing how depressed she was, I couldn’t bring myself to try comforting her on not getting a chance to shine at the end.

“...You were great at strategizing and giving orders. It’s thanks to your magic and words that nobody got shaken up after the lightning flash.”

The rest of the group nodded in agreement.

“Awww, really? Eh-heh-heh, it’s kind of embarrassing to get such a serious compliment...”

Arisa’s reaction turned silly in an effort to hide her shyness.

She might be even less used to being complimented than her older sister, Lulu.

“All right! Let’s check out the loot!”

“Aye!” “Sir!”

Arisa made a loud announcement to distract from her embarrassment, and everyone chimed in their agreement.

Since we were celebrating their victory, I called the elf teachers over to join us in admiring the spoils from the battle.

“Traaaps...”

A giant treasure chest had appeared at the altar, but as Tama observed, it was armed with several traps.

“It’s loaded with paralyzing poison, nerve poison, and regular poison, plus a magical binding trap, an alarm that summons monsters, and even a bomb.”

What a nasty bunch of traps.

And on top of that, it was set up so that all the traps would activate if the treasure chest was moved.

“Geh, it’s like one of those old dungeon-crawler RPGs.”

Arisa looked stumped as she reminisced about old-fashioned RPGs.

“True. It might be difficult to disarm this the proper way.”

“The proper way? You mean you’ve got a sneaky way of doing it, as usual?”

“Of course.”

I put the whole treasure chest into Storage, then placed its contents onto a carpet spread on the floor. I even displayed the coins, gems, and normal jewelry in fancy treasure chests. There was a fair amount of cursed equipment, too, so I put those in a separate box.

For some reason, the shadowfolk Mr. Seoru was holding a bunch of tools, looking disappointed.

Maybe he had been planning to help us disarm the traps on the treasure chest.

“Woooow, byooti-fuuulll?”

“Amazingly amazing, sir! Liza, look, it’s so, so pretty, sir!”

“Yes, I see that.”

Tama's and Pochi's eyes glittered every bit as much as the treasures they were gazing at. Liza smiled down at them gently, in an almost motherly fashion.

"Ohhh, there's some Magic Swords and armor."

"Mm. Staffs. Clothes."

Arisa and Mia examined the equipment laid out on the carpet.

There were at least a dozen magic items of all shapes and sizes and magical accessories in similar numbers.

There were some magic tools as well, but most of them had a limited number of uses, and only a few had unlimited effects.

"Is this a magic tool, too?"

Lulu gazed at a statue inlaid with a crystal ball.

"I detect magic power, I confirm."

Nana was right: The item Lulu was holding was apparently a two-way communication device.

There were other rare objects, too, like one-use item-analyzing papers and charms that could seal cursed objects.

"Hey, master..."

As we were analyzing the goods, Arisa came over to me.

"How did you fight the demon lord? We felt the tremors..."

"Mostly magic. I used a Meteor-like spell to beat him in the end, so maybe the vibrations from that reached here?"

"Oh, huh. Meteor..."

Arisa looked impressed for a moment by my simple explanation; then her face froze.

"...M-m-master?"

Her expression blank and voice quivering, Arisa grabbed me by the collar.

She seemed to want to talk in private. I leaned my ear close to her lips.

“B-by ‘Meteor,’ you don’t mean...that starfall was you?”

“Yeah. You saw that, too?”

“Uh-huh, we watched it from the mountains before we entered Seiryuu County—I mean, *hang on!*” Arisa’s voice pitched higher. “Master, you can seriously use crazy magic like that?”

“Sure, but I normally keep it sealed off, since it’s pretty dangerous.”

I nodded and decided to clarify a little.

“But that’s the only spell I have that’s *that* powerful. The rest are mostly intermediate spells I learned from scrolls.”

I really needed to master “Chant” already so I could use greater spells and the spells I’d developed for myself.

I’d been practicing every morning and evening, but maybe I should start doing it in my free time during the day, too.

“Master...are the people aboveground all right?”

“I am worried about the larvae, I report.”

Lulu and Nana seemed concerned about the people of Labyrinth City. The other kids felt the same way, of course.

“I used a City Core barrier to stop the shock waves and sandstorms, so there shouldn’t be any damage to Labyrinth City. I’ll check with Space Magic, just to be safe.”

As I spoke, I activated Clairvoyance and Clairaudience.

The young maids in the mansion looked anxious, but Miss Miteruna and the older maids appeared fine, so there didn’t seem to be a problem.

At the orphanage, while the teachers and young children seemed a little nervous, the older kids were already plotting to go collect pieces of the meteors that had fallen in the desert.

It sounded like a fun fantasy adventure, but there were dangers on the way, like the forest of evil veria and the mountains at the border. I would have to stop them before they put their plan into action.

The explorers' school students and teachers were going about business as usual; they seemed more focused on their training than the distant meteor shower.

"Looks like everyone we know in Labyrinth City is fine."

"Oh, good."

"Thank you, master, I declare."

Once I'd reported back to the group, I checked in on the rest of my own friends.

Some of the explorers in the guild were exclaiming that a demon lord had appeared, but the likes of Mr. Dozon and Mr. Jelil kept them in check.

The sharpshooter Miss Helmina of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga and her company, who I'd teleported with the City Core, were on their way to Labyrinth City. They were passing right by the overlook tower at the mountainous border, so they must have already reported to the nation.

Which might explain why the politicians and priests who'd received their report were causing a far bigger uproar than the citizens on the street.

At any rate, it would probably be best to relate the appearance and subsequent defeat of the demon lord to the top brass as soon as possible.

"Your Majesty, do you have a sec?"

I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to connect to the Shiga king and spoke to him in the tone of Nanashi the Hero.

"Ances—I mean, Lord Nanashi!"

As usual, he still seemed to think that Nanashi and the ancestral king Yamato were one and the same.

"Sounds like you already know that the Dogheaded Demon Lord appeared in the desert, then?"

"D-Doghead?! The demon lord that appeared is that legendary devil?!"

The king of the Shiga Kingdom sounded like he might faint.

"Yeah."

“S-so the beginning of the end of the world has come...”

He choked back a sob of despair.

Oops. I should’ve opened with the fact that I’d won.

“Don’t worry about it. I already beat him.”

“...Pardon?”

“Remember? A demon lord appeared, so I took him down like I promised.”

“What an incredible feat! Only you could accomplish such a thing, anc—erm, Lord Nanashi. How am I ever to express my gratitude?”

“A simple thank-you would suffice.”

I didn’t need any money or peerage.

“Well, see ya next time I’m in town.”

I cut off the Telephone spell without waiting for the king’s response, lest he try to talk my ear off.

It was certainly rude, but that was the personality Nanashi the Hero was supposed to have, so it shouldn’t be a problem.

At any rate, that should take care of the politicians.

“What do you want to eat to celebrate your victory?”

We would have to cover up the time saved with teleporting and other shortcuts before we returned to the surface. I figured we should wait at least five days, so I decided we could have a celebration at the labyrinth hot springs with only close friends until then.

“Meeeat?”

“Meat is the best, sir!”

Tama and Pochi piped up cheerfully.

“Mrrr. Mushroom steaks.”

“Omelet rice, I declare.”

“Perhaps fried chicken or chicken skewers would be appropriate?”

“I want sukiyaki and tuna and blowfish sashimi and matsutake rice!”

“Tama wants fried shrimp and hamburg steeeeaks?”

“Pochi wants Mr. Hamburg and a thick Mr. Steak, too, sir!”

When Mia, Nana, Liza, and Arisa all proposed specific dishes, Tama and Pochi hurriedly added on their own requests.

They sure knew what they liked.

“What about you, Lulu?”

“I-I’d eat anything you make for us, master!”

I pressed Lulu for her request, but that was the most I could get out of her besides a sheepish smile.

“Of course, I’ll make it myself. We’re celebrating your victory, after all.”

At that, the other kids cheered excitedly, not only Lulu.

It wasn’t a bad feeling to get a reaction like that.

At this point, Lulu’s cooking was just about as tasty as mine, but I decided to really flex my cooking muscles and make them a true feast.

“I’d be happy to help!”

“Tama too!”

“Pochi will help, too, sir!”

When Lulu offered to help, Tama and Pochi quickly posed behind her.

“Please allow me to take care of the dishes and vegetable peeling.”

“I shall cut out star shapes, I declare.”

Liza’s offer was one thing, but I wasn’t sure if Nana’s was actually helpful or just her personal preference.

“Well, I’ll cheer you all on with Mia.”

“Mm. Concert.”

“Live music from Mia? Now, that’s a treat.”

“Maybe I’ll sing along, then?”

It wasn't exactly chill beats to work and study to like on a certain video website, but a song from Mia and Arisa would definitely make cooking fun.

"Are we celebrating in the vacation house?" Arisa asked.

"Yeah, I thought we could party with friends in the labyrinth hot springs."

"Master, I wish to celebrate with the larvae as well, I report."

"Don't worry. Once we go back aboveground, we'll have another celebration."

We wouldn't be returning for at least five days, so I figured we could celebrate and relax in the labyrinth hot springs for a while to recover from all the training and battling.

"All right, let's get going, then."

My companions and I joined hands, and we teleported with Return away from the battlefield and back to everyday life.

After all was said and done, nothing beat a nice, relaxing time with friends.



EX: Team Zena's Travels

We managed to get out of trouble thanks to a bit of good luck, but it seems that fate still intends to test us. However, as long as I have trustworthy friends by my side, we can overcome any obstacle!

"Lilio! I found a survivor! Call the laborers!"

"Great job, Zenacchi! Wait right there—I'll call them over!"

Despite her light response, Lilio was clearly fighting back exhaustion as she came running over.

I couldn't even see her off before I began my next spell.

"Miss Zena, you're using too much magic. Please take a longer break in between spells."

I appreciated Miss Iona's concern, but I shook my head.

Right now, it was more important to find the people who were buried alive and tell them that help was on the way.

My cheeks were starting to hurt from all the chanting. I had to be extra careful not to stumble over any part of the Whisper spell.

"Iona, it looks like rescue is going smoothly on the other side, so I left them in charge and came over here."

"Great. Once Miss Zena's spell activates, you can be the one to speak to those in need of rescuing. Is that all right?"

"Yes, of course."

Lou's voice was lower and raspier than usual from shouting, but she still quickly agreed to help.

She sounded like a dependable older sister, her voice reassuring the people waiting to be rescued.

Once my spell activated, I had Lou address the rescued people while I shifted to meditation. I needed to recover some magic to help find the next batch of survivors.

I heard a horse trotting closer, and Miss Iona relayed information to me as I sat with my eyes closed, still meditating. “The future count has arrived.”

I wanted to recover a little more magic, but it would be too rude to continue meditating in the presence of an upper noble, so I gave up and stood.

“Lady Marienteil, it seems you’ve had yet another busy day of saving soldiers! Word of your achievements has even reached my ears.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Why would the next count of Lessau come all the way out here just to thank soldiers like me for their hard work?

“I have heard that your younger brother will be taking over as head of the Marienteil family. If you like, I should be happy to make you a vassal of mine. I can only give you the rank of honorary hereditary knight at first, but depending on your work, I’d be willing to bet you can earn permanent nobility.”

“I am truly humbled by the offer, but I’m afraid I’ve already sworn allegiance to Count Seiryuu. I do hope you will forgive me.”

It was certainly an impressive offer, but since my family has served that of Count Seiryuu for generations, I could hardly start serving a different master now.

The young future count seemed surprised at my refusal, and a flash of anger passed across his displeased expression. But of course, he had the decorum not to voice those feelings.

“I see... Well, if you change your mind, come to me at any time. I shall save a seat for you.”

With that, he left with his knights in tow.

“Are you sure about that, Zena? Once your brother takes over as head of the house next year, you’ll only be considered a semi-noble, right?”

“That’s okay with me. Regardless, the army treats nobles and commoners

equally.”

“Right, Zenacchi’s got a boy waiting for her...”

Darn it, Lilio! When did she get back anyway?

This had nothing to do with Mr. Satou... Well, not much, in any case.

“Besides, we don’t know if he’ll actually inherit the county.”

“Really?”

“There have been too many casualties, and he even entrusted demon-slaying to some unknown magic user.”

“Ah, so he doesn’t really have any achievements to make up for his mistakes... Not to mention, his reputation must be in the dirt after he let so many workers die in that unnecessary field battle.”

“Lou, hush!”

There was a time and a place for comments like that. What if someone from the house of Count Lessau was listening?!



It’d been ten days since our battle with the demon ended.

Of the Elite Training Corps that was sent to the labyrinth from Seiryuu City, about half of the knights on the front lines were killed in battle. Our team and Norina’s team miraculously made it through with minimal wounds, but Rodril’s magic team and the mixed team were virtually wiped out.

The day after the battle with the demon, Captain Delio (who lost a leg in battle) and one of the knights set out to return to Seiryuu City to report to the count.

We also sent out a messenger bird around the same time, so we should be receiving a response from Seiryuu City soon.

If we didn’t hear back, we would probably return to the city once we finished assessing the survivors and casualties of the Labyrinth City Elite Training Corps.

Vice Captain Leelo, who was originally thought to be dead, was fortunately found alive underneath the rubble but was rescued at the cost of her leg.

“Listen up, everyone. We’ve received orders from the count—our training mission is to continue.”

As soon as the vice captain read the order, a wave of reactions ran through the group. Some cheered, some looked miserable, and some just laughed in disbelief.

“Vice Captain, please let me go back to Seiryuu City. I don’t care if people call me a coward—I want to be by the side of my wife and children.”

“Vice Captain Leelo, I’m going back, too. I can’t wield a sword properly with this arm.”

A large-framed soldier spoke up, followed by a man who’d lost his dominant arm to the demon’s battle magic. A few others chimed in to agree with them.

Vice Captain Leelo held up a hand to stop them.

“Don’t panic yet. There’s more to the order...”

As she read on, it said that anyone who had sustained injuries or lost the will to continue to Labyrinth City was welcome to return to Seiryuu City.

Surprisingly, Rodril was going back, too.

The guilt of losing his head in battle and leading the magic squad’s guards to destruction must have been weighing on him.



“Sir Hence, I’m leaving you in charge.”

“Yes, sir. By the time we get back to Seiryuu City, we’ll be so strong that they’ll want to recruit us all for the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga.”

“Ha-ha, that’s the spirit.”

Maybe it was my imagination, but Vice Captain Leelo’s smile seemed hollow in response to the enthusiasm of our new captain, Sir Hence.

In the end, only eight of us were going to Labyrinth City Celivera: Sir Hence and his attendant, Norina’s team and me, the civil officials, and Gayana and one other survivor of the mixed team.

We saw off the group that was heading back to Seiryuu City, then hurriedly

prepared to leave Lessau ourselves.

“You really aren’t having any second thoughts, Zena?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The next count gave you such a passionate offer.”

Finished with her preparations, Norina started chatting with me teasingly.

I shook my head and countered with a question of my own. “Didn’t *you* get an offer from the next count, too?”

“Sure, but mine was just as a normal magic soldier.”

I tilted my head. Didn’t he invite me because he wanted magic soldiers close at hand, too?

“Give it a rest. Zenacchi didn’t pick up on a single bit of the count’s intentions.”

“True... I mean, he only sent a vassal to invite me, but in Zena’s case, the future count came all the way here in person.”

“Exactly!”

Much to my frustration, Lilio and Gayana joined Norina in making strange statements.

As if an upper noble, especially the son of a feudal lord, would ever take an interest in a lesser noble’s daughter like me.

If Sir Hence hadn’t given the order to move out, Lou and Miss Iona might’ve joined in on this ridiculous story, too, and then things would’ve really gotten out of control.

Thus, we set out from Lessau County, a powdery fall of snow pressing at our backs as it began to dance through the air.

It was a difficult path from Lessau County to Zetts County.

The remaining monsters gathered by the intermediate demon had built nests throughout the area.

The safety of a road was the responsibility of that territory’s ruler, yet there

were no soldiers on patrol, so most of the monsters had been left to do as they pleased.

Then our new captain, Sir Hence, agreed to hunt down the monsters out of sympathy for the villagers who were upset about them, which delayed our progress significantly.

Although of course I also wanted to help the people who were suffering; I didn't blame Sir Hence for his actions.

"More monsters? Really?" Lilio groaned.

"It seems some large fang ants have built a nest near a settlement this time."

I told her what I'd heard from Sir Hence.

"Man, I was a fool to think we'd make easy progress once we got into Zetts County."

Lou was right: Lessau County had been rough because their army had been mostly wiped out, but Zetts didn't seem to be sending many soldiers on patrol, either.

If the rumors we heard on the road were true, they had gathered most of their forces around the capital city, fearing a surprise attack from demons.

We traversed the lengthy Zetts County from the north until we finally reached a hill where we could see the town at the southernmost part. Once we passed through it, we would be in the kingdom-controlled territory in a matter of days.

We're almost to Labyrinth City—please wait for me, Mr. Satou!

"Hey, is it just me, or is Zena acting strange?"

"Ahhh, that's the face she makes when she's thinking about that boy and encouraging herself. Just smile and nod and pretend not to notice."

"Exactly, Lou. The power of love is a wonderful thing."

Honestly! They're all so childish!

Especially Miss Iona—I can tell when you're smiling, you know!

"Ah-ha-ha-ha... Hmm?"

Lilio's smiling face suddenly turned serious.

"There's an enemy in the clouds right above us!"

"A monster?!"

"Probably a wyvern!"

At Lilio's warning, everyone jumped into action at once.

The wyvern was a familiar enemy from back home, so even if we hadn't encountered one since leaving Seiryuu County, we knew what to do.

"All hands, prepare for anti-air battle!"

Sir Hence issued a brave order.

...Huh?

We all looked at him in confusion.

His attendant hurriedly whispered in his ear.

"Change of plans! Retreat to the village beyond the hill! If the wyvern tries to approach, Zena and Norina will bring it down with magic and buy us time!"

Visibly relieved, everyone started moving accordingly.

"I wish our temporary new captain had a better grasp of his own squad's limits. There's no way ten of us could win against a wyvern."

"Don't say 'temporary,' Miss Lilio. He's doing his best in the face of all this sudden responsibility."

"Right. You like the incompetent ones, Iona. When a man comes crying to you—No, never mind, it's nothing. Come on—don't pull your sword on me! Hey!"

Miss Iona was smiling cheerfully as she reached for her sword.

I appreciated that they were such close friends, but this wasn't the time for that sort of thing.

"Lilio! Look at that wyvern's tail and right wing!"

A soldier from Norina's squad pointed out something unusual about the wyvern.

Since it was so high up, I could see it only as a black blob.

“Huh? Whaddaya mean...? Oh! Everyone, at ease! That’s a wyvern rider from the kingdom!”

“Wait, there’s a rider? And in white armor! Is that Sir Torel of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga? He rides a wyvern, doesn’t he?!”

The old rider circled around us and waved, then headed off toward the capital.

The Eight Swordsmen of Shiga—the strongest warriors in the Shiga Kingdom. No doubt he was in the midst of some urgent mission.

I wondered what it might be as we entered the border town of Fau.

But what we found out in town was nothing I ever would have expected.

“...A dragon, you say?”

“Yeah, so all caravans to the royal capital are at a standstill until further notice.”

Incredibly, a lesser dragon had apparently taken up residence in the mountain range at the border.

Lesser or not, there was no way humans could do anything about a real dragon.

And so we were forced to stop in the town of Fau.



We’d been in Fau for a month now.

Unless you could fly like a bird, the only way around the mountain pass where the dragon had taken up residence was either to cross the treacherous Fujisan Mountains and go through the Muno Barony or head all the way back to Lessau County and take the main road through the Eluette Marquisate.

The way through the Muno Barony would take months, so that was out of the question, but even the Eluette route would be more than a month’s detour.

“Any luck, Miss Zena?”

“Unfortunately, all the shops have raised their prices since yesterday. We really should have stocked up on the first day we arrived.”

Whether we chose to go through the Eluette Marquisate or wait in town until the royal army chased off the dragon, we would need provisions to resume our journey, but the prices had inflated so severely that we couldn’t get the amount we needed.

We tried going to buy directly from nearby farm villages, but their stocks had already been bought up by sharp-eyed merchants.

“Zenacchi!”

A short figure waved at me from across the crowd.

I couldn’t see who it was, but there was only one person who called me that.

“Lilio!”

When I called back, I could see the owner of the hand hopping up and down. Lou was also behind her.

They’d been out investigating possible shortcuts, so I hadn’t seen them in a trimoon.

“Good to see you, Zenacchi.”

“Welcome back, Lilio.”

We were so excited to see each other again that we couldn’t resist an embrace.

Given that we were on a busy road, we were probably in the way, but the passersby around us simply smiled at us kindly.

“It’s great to see you. Did the shortcut look usable?”

Withdrawing to the side of the road to avoid blocking traffic, I asked Lilio about their investigation.

“Hard to say. Carriages wouldn’t be able to go that way, and even if we were to carry our things, I doubt the civil officials and Little Miss Attendant would make it.”

“It’d be tough for us soldiers, too. Even I would be complaining if I had to

traipse through there in my armor and helmet.”

Lou prided herself on her constitution, so if even she would have a hard time with this route, it would certainly be difficult for civilians.

“We saw the dragon in the mountains, too.”

“Was it a lesser dragon, like they say?”

Lilio and Lou looked at each other.

“Well, about that... It was actually a weird lizard with some kind of colorful scarf around its head.”

“It was bigger than the hydra we saw before, but it didn’t have wings.”

I’d never heard of a dragon matching that description.

“That doesn’t sound like a lesser dragon, then. I’d wager it’s a demi-dragon, like wyverns and hydras.”

The rest of us nodded in agreement with Miss Iona.

“Then if we can just get rid of it, we’d be able to go through the mountain pass.”

“Yeah, but that thing was huge, y’know? We wouldn’t be able to beat it that easily.”

“And it was spitting some kind of yellow mist out of its mouth that melted through rock, too...”

My relief at hearing that it wasn’t a real dragon lasted only a few seconds before Lou and Lilio dashed my hopes.

“Do you have any idea why it’s taken up in the mountains?”

“Apparently, it likes the mandarin orange trees that grow there. It was chewing up a tree whole and then taking a nap when we saw it.”

From Lou’s description, I couldn’t help but picture this demi-dragon as a rather cute creature.

“Maybe it’s an herbivorous monster?”

“I dunno... It was eating the rocks it melted, too, so it’s probably an omnivore,

yeah?”

That was difficult to picture.

“There’s no point speculating on a monster’s eating habits.”

“At any rate, we should go report to the captain,” I suggested as my friends chatted, and we walked with heavy footsteps to our temporary base.

Ah!

I spotted a black-haired young man in the crowd, and I followed him with my eyes without thinking, even though there was no way Mr. Satou would be in this area now based on when he had departed.

Hmm? Wait, but I recognize that person.

Following my gaze, Lilio exclaimed, “Aah! There you are!” and chased after him.

“What’s gotten into her?”

“Don’t you remember? That’s the boy who dumped her in Seiryuu City,” Iona reminded Lou.

I didn’t quite remember his face, but it must be John, Lilio’s ex-boyfriend who had taught people how to make croquettes and syrup candy in Seiryuu City.

But we knew him from a more recent encounter, too.

“Wait, isn’t that—?”

Lou whirled around, and I nodded.

“Yes, that’s the person who saved us from all those monsters in Lessau County.”

He’d appeared with those seven magic swordswomen and sliced through the monsters with a shining sword.

We hadn’t seen him since he ran off after the magic-using woman who defeated the demon.

“You left Seiryuu City almost a year ago—what are you still doing so close by? I thought you were gonna go make a name for yourself in Labyrinth City?”

Oh, Lilio. She barely even thanked him before she started a fight.

“I told you my plans weren’t set in stone, didn’t I? I heard there were some ruins at the outskirts of Lessau County, so I went to explore them.”

“Did you find anything?”

“You might say that. Or maybe not.”

“What does that mean?!”

Lilio and Mr. John bantered away endlessly.

Even though she must be tired from her investigation, Lilio was smiling energetically, clearly enjoying their back-and-forth.

“Those two fight like goblins and dogs—maybe we should leave them to it and go report to Captain Hence.”

“Good idea. I don’t want to get caught in the cross fire.”

We waved to Lilio and headed back to the barracks to give our report.



“There’s another shortcut? Since when?”

Much to everyone’s excitement, Lilio came back late that evening with an intriguing piece of information.

This could be our chance to finally resume our journey.

“Yeah, according to a certain someone.”

She was probably referring to Mr. John.

“But didn’t the town guards all tell us that there’s only one path?”

“Yeah, but I guess that’s ’cause there’s a path through the ravine where that fake dragon thing lives. Carriages can’t get through there, either, but it’s a lot less steep than the other one, so he said it’d probably be easier on foot.”

Upon hearing Lilio’s report, Sir Hence looked ready to lead everyone into the ravine right this moment, but fortunately, his attendant talked him into sending a few scouts to investigate first.

For some reason, all eyes turned toward my friends and me.

I don't have a very good feeling about this.

“All right, we'll send Zena's team to investigate the ravine.”

Sir Hence cleared his throat and proceeded to give us our orders.

We couldn't refuse, of course. I agreed at once to the assignment, and we began our preparations.

The next day, we went to a large restaurant downtown to ask around about the shortcut Lilio's ex-boyfriend had mentioned.

“John!”

“This is about that thing we discussed yesterday, right? Come with me.”

Mr. John led us to a private room in the back of the restaurant to give us the details on the shortcut.

“So the dangerous parts of the route are this valley where harpies live and a rocky area infested with slimes?”

“Yeah. Monsters appear in plenty of other places, too, but based on what Lilio's told me, I think your group is strong enough to get through the ravine easily as long as you avoid those two spots.”

I spread out a map of Zetts County that I'd brought from Seiryuu City to verify his explanation.

It was a rough map, but I sketched out directions and landmarks as he explained.

“Whoa, Johnny's got a harem!”

The black-haired waitress who brought our food back to the private room teased John casually.

“Urgh. Mito...”

The woman called Mito grinned and prodded Mr. John in the cheek.

They had the same black hair and somewhat similar facial features, so they were probably from the same homeland.

“Who's this? A friend of yours?”

Lilio looked decidedly unhappy with this display.

Could this be what they call a love triangle?

“Ooh, someone’s jealous!”

“L-Lou, don’t be silly!”

“Yes, that’s clearly more of a brother-sister relationship than a romantic one.”

Miss Iona was sharp about romantic relationships, so if she said so, it was probably true.

I felt silly for getting my heart rate up at the possibilities.

“This is Mito. She looks young, but she’s really an old lady.”

“Ruuude! I told you I’m eternally twenty, remember? Little boys who don’t listen are in for a scolding!”

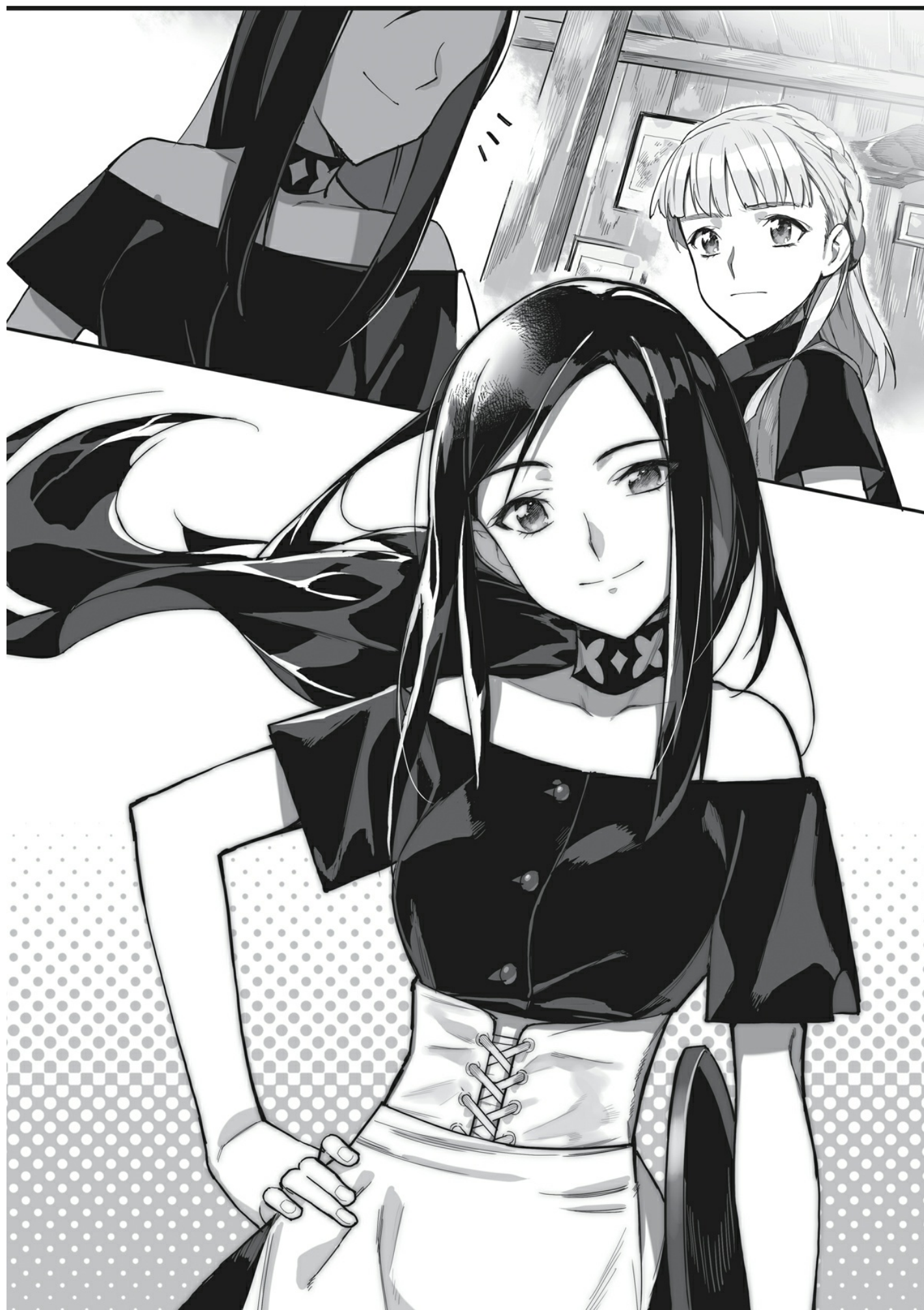
“See, that just makes you sound even more like a granny.”

“D’oh!”

“Who says that?”

But the pair did seem awfully flirty to me.

Lilio must have felt the same way, because she was still scowling.



I didn't know what to do, so I turned to Miss Iona for assistance, but she looked to be enjoying the situation far too much to help matters.

And Lou was determined to be an observer as always...

"So how do you two know each other exactly?"

"Ran into each other in some ruins."

"Ruins? Are you an explorer?"

"I was for a little while once. A looong time ago."

Miss Mito was clearly no ordinary person, but she didn't exactly look like a rough-and-tumble explorer to me.

"She's not your new girlfriend, is she?"

"Of course not. I'm not into old ladies."

"That's not nice! I'm not so starved for love that I'd waste my attentions on some cheeky little brat, either."

"Uh-huh. I suppose I might believe you, then."

Lilio's mood improved when the pair mutually declared their lack of romantic interest.

Thank goodness.

Relieved, I looked toward the door and noticed that a pretty young blond girl was peering in.

"John's ex-girlfriend is here, I report."

"Oh, hey, Hachiko."

Miss Mito waved at the girl.

"Urk, Number 8! What are you slacking off for? Get back to work!"

"John and Mito are slacking off as well, I declare."

What a strange way of speaking... Wait a minute!

I realized this was one of the girls who'd been with John when he rescued us from the demon's monster army in Lessau County.

I didn't get a good look at her face then, but I remembered the woman's lovely blond hair and strange manner of speaking.

But that would mean...

"What's the matter?"

Mito gave me a friendly look as she noticed my stare.

...Was she the black-haired magic user who defeated the intermediate demon all on her own?

But the casual way she was chatting with Lilio and Mr. John didn't match up with the powerful figure who'd used magic like that of the ancestral king.

Just then, a blond woman with her hair in a braid walked in; she had the same face as the girl Mito had called Hachiko.

"Mito, Number 8! Get back to work! The manager is furious!"

"I do not wish for a wage cut, I entreat."

"Oh, yikes!"

Grabbing the other blonde by the scruff of the neck, the woman dragged her and Miss Mito back to work.

"Honestly. All right, let's go over the rest of the route."

"A-all right. Thank you."

I wanted to ask about Miss Mito, but I couldn't blow off the reason we'd come here in the first place.

Instead, I wrote down the information John gave us on the map.

"If possible, we would appreciate it if you could guide us, Mr. John..."

"I can sneak in anywhere on my own, but I'd be no help in a group. I'm way weaker than you ladies. I'd only slow you down if I came along."

"Huh? You seemed really strong to me."

"Ah, that was because of a special strengthening spell that only worked for that time. Normally, I'm so wimpy that I can't even take on a single harpy."

Lilio asked more about the strengthening spell, but he didn't seem to want to

get into detail about that or Miss Mito.

For the time being, John and company were working at this restaurant to save up for traveling expenses, so we agreed to come back some other time when the rest of his group was free.



“What a strange place.”

We were walking through a valley full of strange steam.

As the name Withered Valley implied, it was full of dead trees, creating a mysterious atmosphere.

The fog made it difficult to see very far into the distance. If we let our guards down, monsters could easily sneak up and attack us.

We were told that the fog was bad for one’s health if you were exposed to it for too long, too.

Miss Iona peered alertly through the mist.

“The harpies should be showing up soon.”

“Yeah. Should I go check it out?”

I hesitated over whether to send Lilio to scout on her own—but took too long in deciding.

A shadow passed overhead.

I couldn’t see what cast it, but based on John’s information, it was probably a harpy.

“Assume anti-air defensive positions! Lilio, keep alert for nearby enemies. Iona, please take over command.”

I started a sound-protection chant.

The harpies’ most dangerous weapon was their voices, which could inflict sleep or hypnosis.

As long as we could avoid that, Lilio should be able to shoot them down.

“Taking command.” Iona drew her sword. “That shadow was most likely a

harpy. Lilio, how many short arrows do you have left?”

“Only seven. I’m sorry. I used too many on the other monsters.”

“Well, there only seems to be one enemy. That should be more than enough.”

I nodded slightly at Iona’s statement. With Lilio’s aim, seven would be plenty.

But something was bothering me: If that shadow really was a harpy, it was flying a little strangely.

Almost as if it was being chased...

“...■■■■ **Sound Protection Bouonmaku.**”

That should do it, right?

I started meditating while I had the chance, focusing on recovering my magic.

If my fears were correct, then it’d be best to get back to full magic power as soon as possible.

I couldn’t hear it because of the spell, but the harpy screeched something as it swooped down at us from a tree.

“Ha-ha! I could hit a target this big with my eyes closed!”

Lilio’s short arrow pierced the base of the harpy’s wing, and it crashed to the ground.

“Lou, guard Miss Zena!”

“You got it!”

Miss Iona mercilessly brought her broadsword down on the harpy’s head.

Lilio drew her short sword, too, but it didn’t seem like she’d be needing it.

Just as we started to relax, the withered trees began to shake in the fog.

“Something’s coming...!”

Lilio, who was in front, called back a warning.

Before our eyes, the creature that had been chasing the harpy emerged from the fog, cutting a swath through the trees as it went.

A long, lizard-like creature with horns and wings like a wyvern’s.

The beast that we citizens of Seiryuu City feared more than any other.

The strongest living creature—a dragon.

They were a foe that humans could never defeat.

Even with an entire squad of Holy Knights from the royal capital, the most they could accomplish was chasing one off.

Judging by its size, it was probably a lesser dragon, but that distinction didn't mean a thing.

If we fought it, we would surely lose—no, we would be one-sidedly destroyed without even a chance to fight at all.

And now it was glaring down at us as it suddenly appeared from the fog.

That alone was enough for all of us to freeze in place, forgetting how to move or even breathe.

I was sure it was only a matter of seconds, but to me it felt like the longest moment of my life.

Then, as if it had lost interest in us, the dragon cast an indifferent glance at the dead harpy, then turned back toward the fog.

My legs nearly gave out from relief, but I was too frightened that the slightest sound might draw the dragon's attention back toward us, so I clenched my teeth and held still.

But just as the dragon was starting to turn away—

A new intruder appeared.

"Hello, hello! It is I! The famous and beloved fourth seat of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga: none other than Torel the Gale! I have come to challenge you to a common bout, good Sir Dragon!"

Riding atop his wyvern, Sir Torel held a magic weapon that was longer than a jousting javelin.

Even as one of the eight strongest warriors in the kingdom, surely he was no match for a dragon.

It would be like fighting one-on-one the greater demon that had appeared in

the Seiryuu City labyrinth. If the silver-masked Hero hadn't appeared, I doubted any one of us would still be alive.

GROOAARRRRR.

The dragon gathered its strength for a moment, then launched itself into the air without even a running start.

For a moment, I thought I saw a mischievous glint in its eye as it took off, but that must have been my imagination.

"Hey, Lilio! Let's get out of here. You too, ladies."

Someone grabbed my arms and dragged me back.

I turned around in surprise to see Mr. John, clad in leather armor.

Behind him was Miss Mito, dressed as if she'd just stepped out to run a little errand.

When our eyes met, Mito waved at me lightly.

She was wearing traveler's boots, at least, but I was surprised she'd made it all this way in her otherwise light outfit.

"Hello? Miss Squad Leader?!"

"Oh, right! All hands, retreat! Into the shade!"

John's gentle prompting brought me back to my senses, and I issued orders to the group.

Overhead, the dragon was fighting Sir Torel like a cat might play with a mouse.

While it was distracted, Mr. John led us to take cover in a crevice in the cliffs of the valley.

"Damn. There definitely wasn't a dragon last time I was here, okay?"

"Hmm? But there's been rumors about the dragon all over town."

"Sure, but that was about the citrus-loving demi-dragon at the peak."

"C'mon! Use your head. What do you think chased it up there in the first place?"

John and Mito bantered lightly, but I hadn't recovered enough to contribute to the conversation.

Even Lilio wasn't butting in, only scowling as she watched their exchange.

"Aah!"

Lou, who was peering outside, pointed up into the sky and cried out.

The dragon had tired of playing chase and was smacking the wyvern out of the sky.

The wyvern skidded across the ground, trampling dead trees as it tumbled our way.

"Dammit, don't come over here!"

"Awww, poor thing. That wyvern probably can't fly anymore."

As Miss Mito observed, one of the wyvern's wings had broken severely right in the middle.

Unless someone used advanced Healing Magic on it, it would probably never fly again.

"Oh, hey, the old guy's still alive."

Mr. John pointed.

The wyvern seemed to have taken the brunt of the impact; Sir Torel had been thrown off, but although he was bleeding, he was standing steadily with his long pike in hand.

"Dragon! I shall stake my life on this lance! Warriors, speak of me in legend!"

The tip of Sir Torel's weapon glowed red, and a blade of light appeared around it.

Could it be...?

"Looks like 'Spellblade.'"

"Whoa..."

John's eyes widened at Mito's appraisal.

"Spellblade" was a secret technique that only three people in all of Seiryuu

County could use.

“Prepare yourself! Spellblade Spiral!”

Sir Torel shot forward like a bullet, attacking the dragon with his lance.

The ground beneath him cracked as he launched himself into the air.

Cutting a red trail through the white mist, the lance drove toward the dragon as if it were being sucked in.

I had no doubt it would break through the dragon’s scales.

The tip sent up a flurry of red sparks as it struck the surface of the dragon.

It can’t be...

The tip hadn’t even reached the scales.

A barrier of light had appeared like chain mail around the dragon, protecting it from the attack.

“I’m not done yet!”

Sir Torel roared, and the red “Spellblade” gathered around the tip in a spiral, putting a slight crack in the dragon’s defense barrier.

“That dude’s crazy.”

“Pretty impressive, Gramps!”

Next to John, Miss Mito clapped her hands lightly.

How could she be so nonchalant?

Even if she was that same magic user from before, a lesser dragon was much stronger than an intermediate demon.

And now those blond magic soldiers weren’t here to protect her.

GROUUU?

The dragon tilted its head and knocked off the lance that had nearly reached its scales as one might swat away an insect.

As Sir Torel was momentarily distracted by the lance’s abrupt disappearance from his hands, the dragon slapped him down. Sir Torel bounced along the

ground like his wyvern had moments before, and he appeared to lose consciousness.

He was a powerful knight of nearly level 50, yet that dragon had brushed him off like nothing...

The dragon approached Sir Torel and prodded him with a single claw.

“Zenny, can you use Healing Magic?”

“U-um, yes, a little bit...”

Miss Mito referred to me with a strange nickname, but this was no time to question it.

“How ’bout the advanced spell Cure Stream?”

“I’m sorry; I can only use the most basic intermediate spells...”

“Gotcha. Wouldn’t be able to heal a compound fracture, then.”

Mito didn’t look particularly disappointed, only thoughtful. After a moment, she smiled brightly and stepped forward.

“All righty, then, I guess there’s nothing else for it. You guys stay here.”

“Wait a sec, Granny Mito. You’re way too old for—”

“Watch your mouth, pal!”

“—erm, too young and beautiful, I mean. Obviously.”

John started to follow Miss Mito as she casually stepped out of our hiding place, but Lilio hurriedly grabbed his arm and pulled it close to her chest.

I tried to call out quietly to stop Miss Mito, too, but she simply smiled. “It’ll be fine. Just watch.”

With that, she walked forward. “Scuse me, Mr. Dragon. The match is over—This gentleman clearly can’t fight anymore, so could you go on back to the Fujisan Mountains now?”

ZUGOOOOUN.

“That’s a no, huh?”

A black hole appeared next to her like the “Item Box” skill, and she pulled out

a pole-like staff.

I'd seen that staff before.

There was no doubt about it: She was the magic user who had defeated the intermediate demon.

"All right, then. If you insist, I'll humor you for a second round."

Transparent blades and boards appeared, surrounding her, like the kind made with Practical Magic.

They floated around her like a protective shield, and like spikes to keep out the enemy, following along with her movements like a living thing.

It was almost like the greater magic spell spoken of in the legends of the ancestral king, which was both offense and defense—Wait, magic? When did she chant the spell, though?

"Okay, here goes!"

Miss Mito shot out a rain of Practical Magic bullets that burst as they hit the dragon.

This seemed to hurt a lot more than Sir Torel's attack: The dragon quickly took off into the sky.

...A dragon, running away?

I couldn't hide my surprise at this unbelievable scene.

"I'll be right back, then."

She hopped through the air as if on invisible footholds, chasing after the dragon. I had never seen anyone more nimble than Mr. Satou before.

Miss Mito's battle with the dragon took place beyond the fog of the Withered Valley, so I didn't see the details.

But judging by the occasional yelps of the dragon and lighthearted laughter, I had no doubt it was very one-sided.

If someone tried to tell me a story like this, I was sure I would never believe them.

By the time I finished my emergency first aid on Sir Torel, the battle seemed to have ended on the other side of the valley, and things went quiet.

“Hey, who in the world is that person, really?”

“I told you, I don’t know. She was sleeping in some hidden room beneath the ruins.”

“Maybe she was living in there?”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“More importantly, could you be quiet for a moment, please?”

At Miss Iona’s request, we fell silent. Straining my ears, I heard the sound of wings.

Did the dragon win after all?

“Heeey, we’re dooone.”

It was Miss Mito—waving to us from the back of the dragon. Her other hand was holding some kind of chains made out of glowing magic.

And the chains were attached to the dragon’s mouth like a horse’s bridle.

“I’m gonna bring this troublemaker back to the Fujisan Mountains, so I guess this is where we part ways. It was fun while it lasted, Johnny! If you ever start to miss me, I’ll probably be somewhere downtown in the royal capital...”

“I’m not gonna miss you! But take me with you, dammit!”

“Sorryyy, I can’t go bringing anyone else to the sacred ground of the dragon god. You can split my paycheck with Hachiko and the others, ’kay? See you later!”

Miss Mito waved brightly, then took flight on the dragon off into the distance.

It was just like something out of the legends of the ancestral king who had founded the kingdom.



We put our investigation on hold to take Sir Torel back to Fau along with Mr. John.

Even with five of us, it was difficult to carry him on a stretcher made out of cloaks and dead tree branches.

“My apologies, youngsters of Seiryuu County.”

“Are you feeling better?”

Around when we reached the main road, Sir Torel regained consciousness.

He still seemed to have a fever from his wounds, but he nonetheless told us his reasons for challenging the dragon, bit by bit.

He had been seeking a powerful foe for his final battle before retiring from the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga due to old age. When he’d heard about the dragon, he thought it was the perfect opportunity.

However, since the creature on the mountain turned out to be a flightless demi-dragon, he reported this to Zetts County and was then asked by the royal capital to monitor the demi-dragon’s movements from the skies.

As he was doing so, he’d spotted the real dragon flying unsteadily, and he came down to challenge it to battle.

“Sir, did you really think you could beat a dragon?”

“Even I am not that conceited.”

Sir Torel didn’t seem particularly offended by Mr. John’s blunt question.

“...But I failed to die, it seems.”

With that quiet murmur, he gazed up at the sky with a melancholic expression.

I was sure he was saying a silent prayer for his wyvern, who had died in the battle.

After that, we spoke no more and entrusted him to the care of the Fau guards.

Our paused investigation was never to be resumed.

A few days later, the demi-dragon was subdued.

“The main road is reopened?”

“Yes, the royal knights and Sir Heim of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga defeated it.”

Now that the dragon panic had subsided, and a merchant with connections to a village we’d saved helped us acquire supplies, we were finally able to resume our journey to Labyrinth City.

After I comforted Lilio with a round of drinking, that is.

And soon...

“Now, that’s a huge statue.”

“It’s called a golem, Lou.”

Two gigantic golems stood on either side of the gate before us, glaring down like guards.

This was the entrance to Labyrinth City Celivera.

I gazed at the city, overwhelmed with emotions.

We had finally, finally made it.

I’m coming to see you right away, Mr. Satou!

Afterword

Hello, I'm Hiro Ainana.

Thank you so much for picking up *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*, Volume 13!

Are you all enjoying the *Death March* anime so far, too?

I'm low on pages again, so we'll keep the overview of this volume short.

Having finished their retraining in the previous volume, the group finally moves forward toward their main goal, defeating a floormaster. But then they run into a highly unexpected opponent instead.

Facing his strongest enemy yet, Satou is forced to take the seal off the most powerful magic he knows...

Of course, it's not just battles. I've also added plenty of heartwarming scenes, like the hot springs and feasts, so I hope you enjoy it!

Now for the usual thank-yous! To my editors A and I, the illustrator shri, and everyone else involved in the publishing, marketing, sales, and multimedia aspects of this book: thank you so much!

And to you, the reader. Thank you so much for reading all the way to the end!

Let's meet again in the next volume for the reunion arc!

Hiro Ainana

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